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The nature, function and development of imaginary friendships

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Paper 1

The Phenomenon of Imaginary Companions: A Review of the Literature

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to collate the research findings from various sources into one article in order to provide a comprehensive, objective, up-to-date review of the literature and to inform future research efforts. An article published in 2007 (Klausen & Passman) provides an overview of the emergence of the field as an area of interest to researchers but concentrates mainly on the earliest research efforts and theoretical arguments. Additionally, a seminal text on the area written by Marjorie Taylor, detailing a number of studies and providing a thorough summary of the area, was published in 1999. Thus, there appears to be a deficiency of recent articles or texts describing and synthesising the most up-to-date literature on the topic.

This paper will outline the methods used to collect literature on the area before discussing the main points and research findings on what constitutes an imaginary companion. Theoretical perspectives on the role of imaginary companions are then briefly reviewed. The following sections focus on the role imaginary companions play in children's lives, how common the phenomenon is among typically developing children and the characteristics of children who report having one. Directions for future research will also be discussed.

2. METHODS

The information gathered to write this review was sourced in the following ways:

First, a search of the PsychINFO electronic database was conducted using the keyword 'imaginary companion*' [1]. The initial search returned 182 results, which included all available literature from 1987[2] to the end of December 2013. Limits were placed on the search to include only those results that were in the English language, were published in a peer-reviewed journal, concentrated on the childhood period (from birth-12 years) and employed non-clinical populations. These limits reduced the results list to a selection of 39 articles. A second search with the keyword 'imaginary friend*' and the same limits yielded an additional three articles resulting in a final selection of 42 articles. The articles sourced included publications from New Zealand, Australia, America, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Second, as the retrieved literature was being read, relevant references were noted and sourced directly through the e-journal resources at Queens University. This process was continuous as subsequent literature was read.

Lastly, one book quickly emerged as a seminal text in the area and was also selected for inclusion.

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[1] The use of an asterix (*) after a word is referred to as truncation. The inclusion of this symbol indicates that all variations of the word e.g. companion, companions, companionship are to be included in the search.

[2] Earlier research was excluded as studies before 1940 were fraught with methodological problems (Taylor, 1999) and research in the area was relatively stagnant between 1940 and 1980 (Klausen & Passman, 2007).

3. Discussion

3.1. Why is the Study of Imaginary Companions Important?

"there is not just one kind of friendship"

(Dunn, 2004, pg. 8)

Children's friendships are an important topic for psychological research because, quite simply, friends matter to children (Dunn, 2004). The high prevalence rate of imaginary companions (estimates suggest that between 17% and 52% of children report having one) would suggest that friends of this type are present in the lives of many children and thus it is conceivable that psychologists would be missing a major aspect of what is central to the lives of these children if they do not attend to what is happening between the child and their imaginary companion. The kind of friendship that children experience is an important consideration when attempting to understand the impact of friendship on children's development (Dunn, 2004). Therefore, to fully understand the impact of friendship experiences on children, it is essential that all kinds of friendships are included in research efforts.

Along with research focusing on children's friendships, imaginary companion research may also inform psychological theories concerned with fantasy / reality distinction and the contribution that pretence may make to children's cognitive and emotional development (Taylor, Carlson & Gerow, 2001). Research in this area can provide a unique contribution to understanding children's behaviour as imaginary companions can be a source of information about a child's private experiences, developing imagination, concerns and interests that are naturally emitted by the child (Klausen & Passman, 2007; Taylor, Shawber & Mannering, 2009).

It is also important to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon as, despite contemporary academic literature emphasising the prevalence and normality of the experience, many adults are often unsure of what to make of this form of elaborate pretence (Taylor et al., 2009). A search on the website mumsnet.com, the biggest online network for parents in the UK, reveals a long list of discussions posted by concerned parents about their child's imaginary companion[3]. Additionally, Dr. Karen Majors reports that in her work as an educational psychologist she has been asked if imaginary companions were a positive or negative feature in a child's life and whether parents should be concerned by their presence (Majors, 2009). However, it is not only parents who lack awareness of the phenomenon. In her research with CAMHS clinicians, Wachter (2011) found that some clinicians were apprehensive about working with a child who had an imaginary companion - "*I remember thinking, I don't know very much about this*" (pg. 70). Consequently, ongoing research, and dissemination of the findings beyond an academic audience alone, is important so that the significant adults in children's lives have an understanding of this common childhood phenomenon.

3.2. What are 'Imaginary Companions'?

Exactly what constitutes an imaginary companion has been a point of disagreement in the literature since research into the area began, resulting in a body of literature that is 'disorganised' because key terms and definitions lack the required consistency (Klausen & Passman, 2007). Throughout the history of the field, an invisible form with whom a child interacts has been referred to as a pretend companion, an

[3] Titles of posts include 'imaginary friend - should I be encouraging it?', 'Talk to me about imaginary friends - PLEASE!!', 'Imaginary Friends. Cute or Peculiar?', 'Imaginary friend - how to handle?' and 'Do they only make imaginary friends when they are lonely?'

imaginary friend, an imaginary playmate (Klausen & Passman, 2007), a make-believe companion (Singer & Singer, 1990) and an invisible friend (Gleason, 2004b). Throughout this text, the term 'imaginary companion', which is the most frequently used term in contemporary research, will be used to denote this phenomenon.

One of the earliest working definitions for imaginary companions was provided by Margaret Svendson, an American paediatrician, in 1934. She defined an imaginary companion as:

> *"an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis"(pg. 988)*

Svenson explicitly excluded situations where objects are personified and required the child to always recognise 'the unreality' of their companion (as cited in Taylor, 1999). However, despite this definition being frequently cited and respected as an early attempt at defining the phenomenon, the definitions used in more contemporary research vary (Hoff, 2005), typically around the inclusion of personified objects, the requirement for children to recognise the imaginary status of their companion (Pearson, et al., 2001) and the time condition of 'several months'.

Historically, imaginary companions have been considered entirely invisible entities. However some researchers include 'personified objects' – "physical objects that are imbued with personality characteristics" (Klausen & Passman, 2007, p.350) - as an additional type of imaginary companion (Gleason, 2004b; Taylor, 1999; Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and have suggested that the two forms of play may not differ greatly in terms of the level of imagination involved (Taylor, 1999). What is common (and critical) to both forms is that the child views their companion as a discrete, separate other (Trionfi & Reese, 2009).

Well-known examples of personified objects often provided as examples in the literature are Hobbes from the popular comic strip 'Calvin and Hobbes' and Winnie the Pooh (Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Gleason, Sebanc, & Hartup, 2000; Taylor, 1999). However, it is important that 'personified objects' be distinguished from 'transitional objects' from which children seek comfort and security but do not ascribe distinct personality traits or engage in sustained interaction (Taylor, 1999). Taylor et al. (2004) included both imaginary companions and personified objects in their study and provided the following explanatory description for parents:

> *"an imaginary companion is a very vivid imaginary character (person or animal) with which a child interacts during his or her play and daily activities. Sometimes the companion is entirely invisible, sometimes the companion takes the form of a stuffed animal or doll. An example of an imaginary companion based on a stuffed animal is Hobbes in the popular comic strip 'Calvin and Hobbes'" (pg. 1176)*

Presently, there is little empirical evidence indicating whether it is logical to combine invisible companions and personified objects under one superordinate category. One study (which is discussed in greater detail further on in the paper) has lent support for the suggestion that the two would be better considered separately due to qualitative differences in the types of relationships children have with them (Gleason, et al., 2000). Also, while there is some perceptual support for the experience of a toy as a source of comfort and companionship, the comfort and companionship derived from a completely invisible entity is "more unambiguously cerebral" (Taylor et al., 2009, pg. 212). However, according to Harris (2000) imaginary companions, personified objects and a third form of pretence called impersonation which has been defined by Carlson and Taylor (2005) as a child assuming an imaginary personality and pretending to be that person every day for at least one month, are all similar forms of pretence as they all require that a child

imagines the thoughts, actions and emotions of another and gives voice to their experience. Harris (2000) suggests that these sustained forms of pretence differ mainly in accordance to the mode of pretence utilised: imaginary companions have no objective basis, personified objects are oriented towards an external vehicle such as doll or stuffed animal and impersonation is oriented toward the self. However, there is also the counter-argument that interacting with an invisible entity is a striking, unique behaviour that is distinct from the other forms of pretend play (Taylor et al., 2009). Indeed, most children have toys that they personify on occasion or adopt an alternative identity (e.g. a superhero) at times. The difficulty arises in establishing when these types of play become elaborate or consistent enough to constitute the presence of a personified object or pretend identity. Additionally, many parents routinely animate stuffed toys for children and frequently engage in role play in which alternative identities are assumed. It is however much less common for children to observe adults consistently interacting with an invisible entity (Taylor et al., 2009). However, Taylor et al. (2004) argue that it may not be as simple as considering them as discrete or combined entities as some children have reported having imaginary companions that are both invisible and personified objects i.e. they are based on a specific toy but can also be present in invisible form when the toy is not available.

Definitions also vary on the amount of time the imaginary companion has been present. As can be seen in the explanatory description for an imaginary companion on the previous page, there is no period given for which the companion must have been present. This differs from Svenson's (somewhat vague) minimum period of 'several months'. While many researchers adopt the approach of Taylor et al. (2004)

above, others do require the imaginary companion to have been a stable presence in the child's life for a period ranging from one month (Gleason, 2002) to a more stringent six months (Roby & Kidd, 2008).

While the discussion above provides an account of what an imaginary companion is from a researcher's perspective, a description from the child's point of view is unsurprisingly very different. Imaginary companions are described as very much alive and often with lives, personality traits and preferences independent of those of its creator (Hoff, 2005; Majors, 2013). They do not fall into neat categories with respect to their physical characteristics and vary in age dramatically from tiny babies to old men, and can be humans, animals or exotic creatures that can change form on a whim (Taylor, et al., 2004). Descriptions of companions, which are both charming and intriguing, can be found in Hoff (2005b), Majors (2013) and Taylor (1999) among others.

3.3. Theoretical Understanding

3.3.1. Psychoanalytic Theories

Many of the psychoanalytic writings on imaginary companions conceptualise the companion as being an aspect of the child's self, symbolically located outside the body as a separate other. Nagera (1969) stated that the "imaginary companion frequently plays a specific positive role in the development of the child and once that role is fulfilled, it tends to disappear" (pg. 166). Most frequently, the imaginary companion was seen to provide a defensive function by allowing the child to contend with difficulties that they are experiencing (Freud, 1968). Nagera describes a variety of ways that the imaginary companion can present, with each presentation relating

directly to the specific needs of the child. He presents a case where an imaginary companion was functioning as a superego auxiliary, instructing the child to control their behaviour and bridging the step between the external control of parents and the child's own fully developed superego structure, as well as a case where the imaginary companion was used as a scapegoat by the child to act out impulses that are no longer acceptable. Nagera also recounts a child whose imaginary companion was an impersonation of the child's ego ideals (good, strong, clever) that the child felt was beyond their own reach, as well as a child who used their imaginary companion as an outlet for feelings and thoughts that they could not express.

Nagera (1969) also drew attention to the limited number of psychoanalytic papers written on the topic compared to the number of publications by sociologists, psychologists and educators at this time.

3.3.2. Developmental Theories

Although neither Piaget nor Vygotsky considered play their primary focus, both theorists provide important insights into the role of pretend play in childhood development (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). Piaget was one of the early contributors to developmental theory on imaginary companions and is hailed as the theorist who had the most influence in normalising the phenomenon (Klausen & Passman, 2007). Through his developmental framework on imagination and play, Piaget (1962) highlighted pretend play, or symbolic play as he calls it, as a normal part of childhood cognitive development. He proposed that while pretend play is a critical feature of development, it is a primitive and transient phase, with play becoming more realistic as a child's thoughts become more logical and pretend play eventually being outgrown with the emergence of mature or 'operational' thought. Piaget

referred specifically to imaginary friends in his work and maintained that, similarly to play in general, they served a mastery function by helping children to communicate, develop new skills, deal with difficult emotions and explore and adapt to their environment.

While Yygotsky did not refer specifically to imaginary companions in his work, he viewed play, particularly pretend play, as a tool that can fulfil a child's changing and maturing needs. He proposed that pretend play allowed children to practise skills that were developing but not yet mastered, and enabled the fulfilment of unobtainable desires (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky also theorised that psychological functions were acquired in a social context before being internalised by the individual (Vygotsky, 1962). These assumptions suggest that the function of an imaginary companion may be dependent on the specific needs of the child and that the imaginary companion could be used as a tool for social practice. In this way, the presence of an imaginary companion could support the development of a range of competencies including, but not limited to, language development, problem solving, abstract thinking and conflict resolution.

The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are similar in the way they both describe the immediate function of pretend play as supporting the child in making sense of their everyday experience (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). Similarly, Harris (2000) argues that sustained role play, including the presence of an imaginary companion, promotes the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child and creates a safe space for children to comprehend reality and make sense of their environment. Through a process called simulation, Harris (2000) suggests that role play allows children "to imagine the world from the point of view of another person" (pg. 48) which assists

their understanding of the mental states of others. However, while recognising Piaget's theorising as an important starting point, Harris (2000) disagrees with the assertion that pretend play is a transient, immature psychological function that is eventually outgrown. He argues that the ongoing capacity to engage in pretence is necessary for normal cognitive, social and emotional functioning as indicated by the developmental restrictions of people with autism. Others also support the assertion that involvement in make-believe activites and pretence continues throughout the life span (Singer & Singer, 1990).

In sum, although psychoanalytic theory appears to place emphasis on the child's social and emotional growth and developmental theories are more concerned with the child's cognitive growth, both theoretical orientations suggest that imaginary companions support key stages of development and serve a facilitative function, assisting children in responding to environmental experiences and events.

3.4. Functions of Imaginary Companions in Normative Populations: Empirical Evidence

Early research investigating why some children have imaginary companions frequently suggested negative and serious explanations such as trauma, emotional disturbances and social deficits (for a comprehensive review of the earliest work in the area see Klausen & Passman, 2007). However, many children who were participants in these early studies were not randomly chosen but were already known to clinical and medical services. While children with emotional and mental health problems do often have imaginary companions, recent research has clarified that many children have imaginary companions without such problems (Taylor, 1999)

with these companions being an enduring presence for months (Taylor & Carlson, 1997) and even years (Mauro, 1991 as cited in Gleason, 2002).

Contemporary research advises that, due to their diversity, imaginary companions cannot be easily categorised by function (Taylor, et al., 2004) and summarising the needs met by them is a complex task best undertaken on a case-by-case basis (Taylor, 1999). Taylor (1999) presents a variety of possible functions through the descriptions of case histories including loneliness, issues of competence, restrictions in one's own life, blame, fear, communicating with others and response to trauma, and deduces that the main reason imaginary companions are created is for fun and companionship (see Chapter 4 for descriptions of case histories). Although Taylor separates 'loneliness' and 'companionship' into two separate functions, it could be argued that the two overlap somewhat as having a companion results in a reduction in feelings of loneliness. Further empirical support for the suggestion that some companions function to reduce loneliness is provided by Manosevitz et al. (1973), who reports that 93% of children prefer not to interact with their companion when other playmates are available. Additionally, Mills (2003) found that there was no recognition of the concept of imaginary companions in India and hypothesised that they were not evident as children within that culture spend little time alone (as cited in Klausen & Passman, 2007). Gleason et al. (2000) interviewed the mothers of preschoolers with imaginary companions and found that 20% to 30% of mothers explained the presence of the companion in part as a function of lack of friends and being an only child as well as being due to a change in the family environment. Similarly, in an analysis of internet posts about children's imaginary companions, Jellesma & Hoffenaar (2013) found that 29% of parents mentioned companionship as

the probable function, while 11% mentioned concealing misbehaviour through appointing blame, 9% mentioned emotional support and a further 9% mentioned compensation e.g. the companion having something that the child would like to have.

In order to investigate the functions of imaginary companions in 26 ten-year-old children, Hoff (2005b) adopted a qualitative approach as it "facilitates better understanding of a phenomenon" (pg. 155) and conducted interviews before carrying out thematic analysis on the transcripts. Five main themes emerged, namely: giving comfort and company (the most common theme extracted), providing self-regulation and motivation, enhancing self-esteem, expanding the child's personality and enriching the child's life. Similar to the findings of other studies, the most common reason given for the appearance of the imaginary friend was that the child felt lonely although there was a wide variety of explanations provided. Interestingly, the most common reason given for the disappearance of an imaginary companion was the formation of new friendships or starting school, which also provides support for the 'companionship' function. While some children reported bringing the companion to school with them, the majority of children played with them in the privacy of their bedroom. Children also described how their companion could be a real source of help, from assisting them with their homework to teaching them how to be more inventive. Given that imaginary companions are creations of the child's own imagination, it is fascinating that children report learning things from their companion that they did not already know. The role of the imaginary companion as a way to alleviate loneliness and as a source of support for academic and emotional problem solving was also discussed by Burton (2010) following interviews with 10 primary school children. Hart et al. (2006) provided accounts of adults speaking

retrospectively about their imaginary companions as sources of wisdom, comfort and guidance with one woman recalling that her companion was "unfailingly a positive presence" (pg. 14).

More recently, Majors (2013) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight children aged between 5 and 11 years. Through the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it was established that all eight children mentioned friendship as a main purpose being served by their companion, with all children speaking positively about their friend and about the interactions that they have with them. Similarly, six of the children spoke about the alleviation of boredom that their imaginary companion provided. Additionally, Majors found that in addition to the provision of fun and entertainment, six of the children articulated receiving support from their companion during times of difficulty, with three children describing how contact with their friend enabled them to reduce angry or upset feelings.

Given that comfort and companionship are the main themes emerging from the literature it is not surprising that Honeycutt, Pecchioni, Keaton & Pence (2011-2012) found that 74% of children with imaginary companions talk to their friend on a daily basis. Additionally relationships with imaginary companions have been described as equally, or more, important than relationships with friends and parents (Mauro, 1991 as cited in Gleason, 2002). Gleason (2002) investigated whether children aged four years distinguished between real friends and imaginary friends on the social provisions of conflict, instrumental help, nurturance and power present in the relationship and found that the two relationships were statistically similar. Gleason hypothesises that a single cognitive schema may underlie children's relationships

with both their imaginary companion and their 'real' best friends. Extending that research, Gleason et al. (2006) found that imaginary friends were conceptualised in a similar way to 'real' reciprocal friends and not 'real' unilateral friends. This provides further insight into how children are conceptualising these relationships, as to an outsider an imaginary friend could be the ultimate reciprocal friend or could be a unilateral friend, with the interaction being interpreted as being one-directional. Furthermore, in her qualitative work with children, Majors (2013) details how they mention having similar characteristics and interests to their companions, features that are known to facilitate trust and friendship between people in western culture (Dunn, 2004). These similarities between real and imaginary friends may help explain why imaginary companions can provide children with the psychological and emotional support that they require (Hoff, 2005b).

A further study investigating the qualities and functions of these relationships has shown that the relationships may differ depending on the form of the companion. Gleason et al. (2000), relying on parental description, report that relationships with invisible companions are equal in terms of power and competence, similar to a friendship, while relationships with personified objects tend to place the child in a caring and nurturing role. The authors argue that grouping all types of imaginary companions together when looking at functional significance may not be best practice. However, given that this study relied solely on parental report, the child's nurturing relationship with the personified object may have been exaggerated as, by its nature, a personified object will need to be carried around by the child.

3.5. How Prevalent are Imaginary Companions?

Recent studies have revealed that the creation of an imaginary companion in childhood is relatively common (Taylor, 1999) although, unsurprisingly, these estimates can be influenced by a number of factors including the definition used, the age range of the children, the time the companion has existed and the sources used to gather information. Estimates in studies vary from 17% (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999) to 52% (Hoff, 2005). Although the discrepancy between the two outermost figures may seem large, what is clear is that while the experience is not universal, neither is it unusual, and it could perhaps be described as being simultaneously both a typical and an atypical childhood phenomenon (Gleason, 2004a). Table 1 on the next page shows some of the prevalence figures reported in the literature.

In line with the peak of pretend play more generally (Woolley, 1997), it is frequently stated that while the preschool period is the time when imaginary companions are most apparent (Coetzee & Shute, 2003; Hart & Zellars, 2006), it appears to be a childhood experience that can and does persist beyond this point. A large study conducted by Pearson (2001) revealed that while the prevalence did decrease with age, 19% of ten year olds, 14% of eleven year olds and 9% of twelve year olds reported *currently* having an imaginary companion. This finding does not support the view that it is an experience encountered by only very young children. Furthermore, while conducting a follow up study to their previous research (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), Taylor et al. (2004) found that imaginary companions were not abandoned as early as hypothesised and that having an imaginary companion was as common among 6-7 year olds (31%) as it was among 3-4 year olds (28%).

Authors	Sample Size	Age of Children	% Imaginary Companions	% Invisible Companions	% Personified Objects	Child Report	Parent Report	Parent-Child Corroboration Required	Retrospective Report
(Gleason, 2004a).	88	3–5 yrs	30.7%	12.5%	18.2%	√	√	√	
(Trionfi, 2009)	48	5.5 years	48%	42%	6%	√	√		
(Hoff, 2005).	69	4th Grade (Sweden)	52% (currently or in the past)				√		
(Carlson & Taylor, 2005)	152	3-4 yrs	28%	14%	14%	√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Bouldin & Pratt, 1999)	478	3-9 yrs	17%				√		
(Gleason, 2005)	75	3-5 yrs	39.5%	24%	16%	√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Coetzee & Shute, 2003)	61	3-7 yrs	15%				√		
(Davis et al. 2011)	80	4-7 yrs	19%	13%	6%	√ ⊞	√ ⊞	√ ⊞	
(Gleason et al. 2003)	102	Adult	29.4%						√
(Gleason, et al., 2000),	78	2-6 yrs	42%	19%	23%		√		
(Pearson, et al., 2001).	1795	5-12 yrs	28% (currently) 46.2% (currently/ past)			√			
(Taylor & Carlson, 1997)	152	3-4 yrs	28%			√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Taylor, et al., 2004)	100	6-7 yrs	31%			√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012)	675	Adult	51%						
(Fernyhough et al. 2007)	48	4-8 yrs	46%	41%	5%	√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Tahiroglu et al. 2011)	83	5 yrs	38.6%	25.3%	13.3%	√	√	√ (unless same companion described at a 2nd session)	
(Taylor, Sachet, et al. 2013)	208	3-6 yrs	29.8%	18.75%	11.06%	√	√	√	
(Mathur & Smith 2007-2008)	43	60 - 116 mnths	55.6% (currently or in the past)			√			
(Davis et al, 2013)	148	5 yrs	23%			√	√	√	

Table 1: Prevalence of Imaginary Companions as reported in the literature

3.5.1. Determining the Imaginary Companion Status of the Child

3.5.1.1. Sources of Information

Various opinions have been presented in the literature on the use of the parent or the child as the primary source of information on imaginary companions. Although parental report alone is sometimes used to determine the imaginary companion status of the child (see table 1), arguments have been put forward as to why this may not be optimal practice. First, it runs the risk of excluding children who do not tell their parents about their companion (Gleason, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Taylor et al. (2004) report that one child explicitly requested that her mother not be informed about the imaginary companion she had spoken of. This argument becomes even stronger for older children who may be embarrassed or wary of disclosing an imaginary companion for fear of a negative reaction (Pearson, et al., 2001). Hoff (2005b) reported a similar finding with one ten year old child revealing it was a private topic for her – "this is really very secret" (pg. 161) while other ten years olds appeared awkward and giggled intermittently when giving their accounts of their companion. Older children are also more likely to act out fantasy less openly than younger children are (Taylor, et al., 2004) making the identification of a companion more difficult. Furthermore, although parental reports may be thought of as descriptively more sophisticated, their experience is indirect as aspects of fantasy play and imaginative activity are not easily accessible to parents (Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008) and thus description by a child who is experiencing the relationship directly would be arguably superior in meaning. However, contrary to the assumption that parental description would be more sophisticated, when Gleason (2004b) requested information beyond the mere existence of the imaginary

companion, she found that approximately 66% of parents did not know the sex and 22% did not know the age of their child's imaginary companion, while 41% of parents could provide no physical characteristics. It has also been suggested that parents' attitudes towards imaginary companions may distort their accounts of their child's companion (Gleason, 2004b), which is noteworthy as it has been found that 24% of parents completely ignored the existence of the companion while 3% actively discouraged it (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999), and analyses of posts made on internet-forums by parents found that 55.1% were actively expressing concern about the companion's existence, particularly when their child was older than five years (Jellesma & Hoffenaar, 2013).

Consequently, it has been argued that as the experience of having an imaginary companion is an internal experience, children should be granted the role of expert (Gleason, 2004b). Multiple research efforts have shown that even young children are willing and able to describe and provide information about their imaginary companion in rich detail (Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008; Majors, 2013). However, using children as the sole source of information runs the risk that a companion is created impulsively during the interview (Gleason, 2002) or that a real friend is described instead of an imaginary one (Taylor, Sachet, Maring & Mannering, 2013). Additionally, from one interview to the next, children sometimes describe imaginary companions differently (Gleason, et al., 2000). However, it should be noted that while this inconsistency could indicate unreliability, it could also reflect the ethereal and changeable nature of their companion which a parental portrayal, which is likely to be a cumulative description developed over the course of its existence, is unlikely to be able to provide (Gleason, 2004b).

Finally, retrospective reports which have been used in a small number of studies (Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012; Gleason, et al., 2003) have been criticised, as not all adults who had imaginary companions as children remember them. Those that do remember them may have had particularly vivid experiences perhaps putting them in the extremes of the imaginary companion group in other ways (Gleason, et al., 2003). Additionally, the source of the memory is not always clear and they are often relying on anecdotes that have been provided by their parents (Taylor, 1999).

Given the advantages and limitations to the above sources, it is likely that a combination of accounts from both the parent and the child would be favourable in most cases (Hoff, 2005) although others favour the use of child reported information more exclusively (Klausen & Passman, 2007). It is to these studies that collect information from both the parent and the child that we now turn.

3.5.1.2. Parent-Child Agreement

After information has been collected from the chosen source(s), studies vary still on how they utilise this information to establish the imaginary companion status of the child.

Some studies require agreement on the existence or non-existence of the imaginary companion between the parent and the child (for examples see Bouldin, 2006; Bouldin, Bavin, & Pratt, 2002; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Given the young age of participants in studies in this area, it is understandable why some researchers feel that this parent corroboration is required. However, how often do parents and children agree on the presence or absence of an imaginary companion? One study looked specifically at the level of parent-child agreement on the presence or absence of an

imaginary companion in the child's life (Gleason, 2004b). Interestingly, they found that parent-child agreement on the presence of an imaginary companion was perfect, although some children reported multiple companions of which the parents were unaware. This finding has been documented elsewhere with both Bouldin (2006) and Davis (2011) reporting 100% parent-child correspondence both for children who did and did not have an imaginary companion. However, other studies do not support parent-child agreement to the same degree, with Taylor et al. (2004) reporting inconsistencies in 34 of their 98 parent-child dyads and Gleason (2005) reporting 78% concordance for mother-child pairs and only 50% for father-child pairs (Gleason, 2005). This latter finding could suggest that the reliability of parent nominated imaginary companions could vary as a function of the parent who imparts the information. However, as this study was the only one to compare responses from mothers and fathers separately, this suggestion warrants further investigation. Other studies, which utilise a double-interview approach, waive the requirement for parent-child agreement if the child mentions the imaginary companion again in follow-up interview within two weeks (for examples see Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Fernyhough, et al., 2007; Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Taylor, et al., 2004). An additional technique reported was to consider the child to have an imaginary companion if *either* the child or the mother indicated its presence (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). This particular study highlights the importance and the influence of the specific criteria adopted, as the reported prevalence rate of 48% would drop to 19% if parental report alone was sufficient, 17% if the child's own account was accepted, and 13% if parent-child corroboration was required.

3.6. The Characteristics of Children who Create Imaginary Companions

Evidently, the percentages of children classified as having an imaginary companion vary across studies and are dependent on a variety of factors. However, using the criteria that they deem appropriate, researchers have been able to consistently separate children into two distinct groups – those with and without imaginary companions. Unlike early research efforts that made assumptions about children with imaginary companions by considering those children alone, the focus of more recent studies has been on the identification of different child-specific correlates of having an imaginary companion, by comparing children who do and do not report having one. Consequently, researchers have searched for these correlates across several domains and the various relationships that have been found are discussed heavily in the literature (Hoff, 2005). As will become evident, the creation of, and the interaction with, an imaginary companion is thought to offer some developmental benefits, with the early beliefs of problematic outcomes for such children being abandoned.

3.6.1. Gender Differences

That girls are more likely than boys to have an imaginary companion is one of the most replicated findings in the literature. Numerous studies have reported that girls are significantly more likely than boys to report having an imaginary companion (Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012; Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Gleason, 2004a; Pearson, et al., 2001; Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Taylor, Sachet, Maring & Mannering, 2013). Although some studies have reported no such gender difference (Davis, et al., 2011; Fernyhough, et al., 2007; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008; Trionfi & Reese, 2009), there appears to be no study that finds a significant effect in

the opposite direction. Another frequently reported gender difference is that girls are more likely to have multiple companions than boys are and are more likely to have companions of the opposite sex (Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Coetzee & Shute, 2003; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Taylor et al. 2004; Trionfi & Reese, 2009).

One factor influencing the higher number of imaginary companions amongst girls may stem from the finding that mothers of preschool girls (3-5 years) had more positive attitudes towards pretend play than mothers of boys, with parents also providing more fantasy toys for their daughters than they do for their sons (Gleason, 2005). While these findings might be interpreted to suggest that boys are simply less interested in such imaginative play than girls are, Carlson and Taylor (2005) investigated whether boys simply engage in different forms of imaginative play. Accordingly, it was found that while girls are more likely to have an imaginary companion, boys are more likely to engage in 'impersonation', defined as a child assuming an imaginary personality and pretend to be that person every day for at least one month, currently or in the past. Taylor et al. (2013) replicated this finding. This finding suggests that there are different forms of elaborate pretence in which young children engage that warrant further investigation. Carlson et al. (2005) also found that girls were more likely to have an invisible friend and boys were more likely to have a personified object, which has implications for the results of studies that report significant gender differences while only taking one form of imaginary companions into account.

A final gender difference that is often cited is that girls tend to rate themselves as more competent than their companion while boys rate themselves as less competent (Harter & Chao, 1992) with the interpretation being that girls want companions that

they can care for and mind while boys want powerful companions that they can look up to. However, two attempts to replicate this finding have been unsuccessful (Coetzee & Shute, 2003; Carlson & Taylor, 2005). What Coetzee et al. (2003) found was that both boys and girls tended to rate their invisible companion as less competent than they are. However, boys tended to speak about themselves in a superior manner to their companion while girls tended to adopt a more caring, assisting manner. Qualitative differences such as these are likely to place an important role in deciphering the various functions that the relationships are playing in children's lives.

3.6.2. Family Composition and Home Environment

Researchers have also focused much attention on the family composition of children with imaginary friends and overall there does appear to be some relationship between the make-up of the family and the likelihood of creating an imaginary companion (Taylor, 1999).

First born (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, et al., 2000; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Trionfi & Reese, 2009), only children, (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, et al., 2000; Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and children with fewer siblings (Gleason, et al., 2000) are thought to be significantly more likely to engage in this pretence. Additionally, Bouldin et al. (1999) found that children with imaginary companions were less likely to engage in activities with their siblings. However, as the majority of children with imaginary companions in this sample were first-born children it is possible that age differences between themselves and their siblings reduced the opportunities for joint activities. Still, similarly to other reported correlates, some studies have found no such differences (Hoff, 2005). Some researchers have questioned the results of

studies which have relied heavily on parent report and have asked whether parents mainly notice imaginary companions in their first born children (Hoff, 2005) as mothers tend to have more knowledge of the development of their first child than of subsequent children (Manosevitz, et al., 1973). However, others give a lot more weight to these findings and conclude that social experiences within the family have a substantial influence in imaginary companion creation (Gleason, et al., 2000).

However, it should be noted that other aspects of the home environment have been found to have no such influence such as the relationship status of parents (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, et al., 2000; Manosevitz, et al., 1973) and the amount of time spent with parents (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Manosevitz, et al., 1973).

3.6.3. Personality and Social Behaviour

Early research generated an inventory of negative implications believed to characterise the personality of children with imagination companions. However, these studies are dated and methodologically flawed and will not be considered here because when non-clinical samples of randomly chosen children are used, a much less negative picture emerges (Taylor, 1999).

While some findings have been reported in favour of children with imaginary companions being, for example, more outgoing (Roby & Kidd, 2008) and less shy during the preschool period (Mauro, 1991 as cited in Gleason, 2004a), the majority of studies highlight that the two groups are more alike than different in many ways. No between-group differences have been found for self-rated measures of competence (Taylor, et al., 2004), presence of specific fears, temperament (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002), number of playmates (Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Gleason, et al., 2000),

behaviour problems, shyness, ability to talk to and interact with peers (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Manosevitz, et al., 1973), or any aspect of a personality assessment examining extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness (Taylor, et al., 2004). It has also been reported that preschool children with imaginary companions do not differ on peer acceptance measured by positive peer nominations and number of reciprocal friends (Gleason, 2004a) and that they appear to be just as well liked as other children.

On the other hand, some research has found negative associations with the presence of an imaginary companion. Bouldin & Pratt (2002) report elevated anxiety scores for imaginary companion children, although importantly the mean scores for both groups remained within the normal range. Hoff (2005) found that children with imaginary companions had fewer friends, lower self-image and lower psychological well-being, while Harter & Chao (1992) found lower levels of teacher reported cognitive competence, physical competence and peer acceptance.

Despite some studies indicating negative associations with the presence of an imaginary companion, overall there appear to be more personality and behavioural similarities than there are differences.

3.6.4. Awareness of and Predilection for Fantasy

The air of reality that children assign to their imaginary companions often raises questions about the ability of these children to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Bouldin & Pratt, 2001). This confusion can appear more pronounced when children express strong emotions towards their companion and/or describe their friend's non-compliance (Taylor & Motteiler, 2008). By the age of three, children are

able to verbalise the difference between reality and pretence, reality and toys and reality and pictures (Woolley & Wellman, 1990). However, the literature is full of anecdotes describing situations where imaginary companions needed a seatbelt in the car or a seat at the dinner table and essentially crossed the 'pure fantasy' boundary by requiring space in the real world (Gleason, et al., 2000). Children often love their companions very much and describe their relationships with them as equally and sometimes more important than relationships with real friends (Mauro, 1991 as cited in Gleason, 2002). Interestingly, negative emotional responses have also been reported with children describing feeling frightened by their companion or being angry with them (Taylor, 1999). However, Taylor (1999) is firm in her opinion that these emotional responses should not be interpreted as signs of fantasy-reality confusion, given that make-believe scenarios such as movies and books often elicit a high level of emotional response from adults yet are not taken to indicate such confusion. A study by Taylor et al. (1993) showed that these children are as capable as their peers of making fantasy-reality distinctions, such as distinguishing between real and pretend objects and between scenarios that could happen in real life from those that had to be make-believe. Hoff (2005b) supports this view by reporting that many of the children interviewed were able to take a meta-perspective on the play and confirm their awareness of it as make-believe, with Taylor & Mottweiler (2008) also reporting spontaneous statements by children referring to the fantasy nature of their friend. In fact, Harris (2000) claims that engagement in pretend play could be viewed as demonstrating knowledge of reality rather than confusion about it. However, a study conducted by Bouldin and Pratt (2001) aimed to look specifically at children's ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality in situ. Following a

discussion between the researcher and the child about a monster that lives in a cave, similar in size to a tent that was in the room, a monster-like silhouette was projected quickly onto the side of a tent. The children were then asked to put a notebook into the tent and were given a period of free-play. It was found that significantly more children with imaginary companions intermittently looked at the tent in the free play session, stated that they thought they had seen a monster and thought there may have been a monster in the tent. Thus, while Taylor (1999) was confident in her deduction that young children do not think their imaginary companions are real and never truly lose touch with the fantasy status of their friend, Bouldin et al. (2001) feel, despite their finding, that a lack of empirical investigations necessitates caution when drawing conclusions on this issue. In a somewhat related study, children with imaginary companions (aged 4-8 years), were found to be more likely to misidentify the presence of words in a jumbled speech task (Fernyhough, et al., 2007) leading the author to conclude that such children may have "a general susceptibility to imaginary verbal experiences" (pg. 1095). This finding extends the research to include the extraction of meaning from verbal as well as visual experiences.

While the general belief in the literature may be that these children can make fantasy reality distinctions when necessary, researchers have also looked at the possibility that children with imaginary companions have a predisposition to engage in pretence and fantasy play more generally.

Acredo et al. (1995) found that since infancy, four years olds with imaginary companions had displayed significantly more interest in fantasy play than their peers (as cited in Gleason, 2004a). Similarly, parent report has indicated that children with imaginary companions incorporate more myth and magic into their play more

generally (Bouldin et al., 1999) and are more involved in other creative activities and hobbies (Pearson, et al., 2001), while Taylor et al. (1993) found that children with imaginary companions engaged in significantly more imaginary play with blocks during a free-play session. Children with imaginary companions are also more likely to report that their favourite game and their favourite movie is fantasy oriented (Mathur and Smith, 2007-2008).

Furthermore, Tahiroglu, Mannering and Taylor (2011-2012) assessed children's capacity to pretend and generate an imaginary conversation using a behavioural 'phone task' which required children with and without imaginary companions to pretend to talk to a real friend on a play phone. When given scores depending on whether they pushed the buttons on the phone, held it to their ear, talked, appeared to listen and generated extended conversation, it was found that children with imaginary companions scored significantly higher than other children. More recently, Taylor et al. (2013) replicated and strengthened this finding by also controlling for the possibly confounding personality variables of shyness and extroversion. Taylor et al. (1993) reported that children with imaginary companions were more likely to hold an imaginary object instead of substituting a body part when performing a pretend action, which is a more fantasy oriented and developmentally advanced technique. This relationship may not be robust, with a more recent study failing to replicate this finding (Taylor et al., 2013).

However, these findings do not go undisputed, with other studies reporting no significant differences between the imaginary companion status of the child and parent's perceptions of their child's fondness for fantasy play (Gleason, 2005) or how imaginative they believe their child to be (Roby & Kidd, 2008).

Bouldin (2006) used a structured interview to examine other aspects of children's (3-8 years) fantasy experiences. Children with imaginary companions reported significantly more daydreaming activity, more daydreaming activity when alone, and higher levels of vividness; these children were more likely to be almost able to see and hear the contents of their daydream in front of them. Additionally, while they were just as likely to engage in pretend games as their peers were, children with imaginary companions reported significantly more vivid imagery when playing these games. Although there were no differences in the content of, or memory for, daydreams, nor in the level, content or memory for scary thoughts, the presence of some significant results and the absence of any significant results in the opposite direction led Bouldin to conclude that these children do have a predisposition to engage in fantasy.

3.6.5.Theory of Mind

A small body of research has investigated the link between imaginary companions and the development of theory of mind – "the ability to 'mind-read' or attribute mental states to others" (Frederickson & Cline, 2009, pg. 283). The interest in the relationship stems from the suggestion that there are functional similarities between pretence and false belief (Fador, 1992 as cited in Taylor & Carlson, 1997) and that through interaction with an imaginary companion, children develop an understanding that mental representations are not always accurately reflected in the real world (Harris, 2000). Accordingly, a relationship between the creation of an imaginary companion and performance on theory of mind tasks has been identified in children 4 years of age, independent of their verbal intelligence (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). However, while the authors suggest that this result provides 'strong evidence' of the

link, a more recent attempt to replicate this finding was not successful (Davis, et al., 2011) although this study did use older participants (4-7 years). However, what this latter study did identify is that children with imaginary companions assign more interior self-knowledge (the extent to which they themselves recognise that they are the authority on unobservable aspects of themselves), and less to an adult on interior aspects of the self such as having fun, dreaming, thinking, being hungry and being angry. The authors suppose that because children with imaginary companions can only communicate information about them through language and behaviour they become more proficient at understanding that some aspects of the self are private.

3.6.6. Language Skills

Research indicates that the creation of an imaginary companion is also influential in the development of a variety of language skills.

Some research has found that children with imaginary companions use more mature language and produce more complex sentences with the use of more adverbial clauses, relative clauses and the use of 'and' and 'but' in compound sentences (Bouldin, et al., 2002). The authors speculate that the linguistic advantages may stem from sustained interaction conversing with the companion, but others disagree that linguistic advantages could develop in this way as sophisticated social and verbal skills are not required for successful interaction with an imaginary being (Gleason, 2004a). However, other studies have also reported linguistic advantages through the presence of more advanced receptive vocabularies (Taylor & Carlson, 1997) and higher receptive verbal ability (Davis, et al., 2011).

Additionally, five and a half year olds with imaginary companions were found to provide richer narratives about both a storybook and about a personal experience, although their vocabulary and story comprehension skills were statistically similar (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). The link between imaginary experiences and narrative skills is further supported by a pretend-play based intervention which produced significant improvements in children's narrative length and coherence (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005). Trionfi et al. suggest that children's narrative skills may develop through sharing their imaginary companions with others.

Furthermore, between-group differences were also found for children aged four to six years on the speaker component of a test of referential communication (Roby & Kidd, 2008), which requires the child to compare a target picture to other pictures, identify visual information that makes that picture unique and orally deliver the necessary information to another person. Thus, the task requires the ability to encode and decode verbal information and take the perspective of another person. While many appropriate controls were included in the analyses, no measure for verbal IQ was included. Additionally, given that perspective taking is an important aspect of this task, the potential advantages for the development of theory of mind in children with imaginary companions (Taylor & Carlson, 1997) may be playing a role.

More recently, Davis, Meins and Fernyhough (2013) have provided more evidence for the link between the creation of an imaginary companion and the development of language skills by reporting that 5 year olds with imaginary companions showed greater internalisation of private speech by being more likely to engage in muttering, whispering, verbal lip movements and unintelligible private talk during a free play-session. Similarly to the aforementioned speculations of Bouldin, et al. (2002), the

authors argue that the advanced development of this skill may be due to the more numerous opportunities for social dialogue and dialogic self-talk that having an imaginary companion affords, with the dialogue between the child and their imaginary companion facilitating the development of private speech in a similar way that conversation with a real-life social partner is believed to advance this skill (Vygotsky, 1987).

3.6.7. Caveats to Consider

One important caveat relating to these findings has yet to be mentioned as it applies to the majority of the aforementioned studies that describe characteristics that are common among these children. This significant limitation is that the relationships described are correlational in nature meaning that the relationship could conceivably go in the other direction e.g. children with superior theory of mind are more likely to create an imaginary companion or that a third variable exists that could account for the relationship. In short, "there is no *causal* evidence for the benefits of imaginary companion play in any developmental domain" (Trionfi & Reese, 2009, pg. 1310). Furthermore, while some of the relationships may appear clear, the reasons for many of them, particularly those relating to language skills, are not. Speculative and hypothetical explanations, in need of further exploration and verification, are presented for most of the findings. Furthermore, if we agree with Harris's (2000) assertion that invisible companions, personified objects and impersonation are similar in terms of their social and cognitive functions, then studies that focus solely on invisible companions may have children from the other two groups 'contaminating' the control group. Therefore the discussion on page 11 relating to the true definition of what constitutes an imaginary companion is significant when

attempting to decipher and compare results from the developmental research. It should also be noted that the majority of the research in this area has been conducted with white, mostly American, participants, with Mathur and Smith (2007) being the only notable exception.

3.7. Directions for Future Research

In their papers authors have recognised the need for further research in a variety of areas, some of which have been undertaken and some await further investigation.

Firstly, it is essential that future research pay specific attention to the operational definitions and criteria for imaginary companion status that they employ. An increase in consistency would enable results to be more reliably compared. Additionally, as there has been an array of studies published in the last 20 years, researchers should aim to gather data using more sophisticated methods and in a more deliberative manner so as to contribute to the literature in a meaningful way (Klausen & Passman, 2007).

Gaining deeper insight into the relationships that children have with their imaginary companions, and the nature of the companions themselves, is necessary (Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008). The majority of the developmental research undertaken on the topic of imaginary companions employs quantitative or mixed methods design (Majors, 2013) and detailing these relationships in a more thorough, qualitative manner may provide information on children's perspectives of the role the companion plays in their life. Given the similarities that have been uncovered in relation to children's views and concepts on both real and imaginary friendships, conducting these investigations similarly to how research on real relationships is

carried out - through interview and observation - is preferable (Gleason, et al., 2000). Gleason et al. (2000, 2004a, 2004b) make a variety of suggestions on the direction such questioning should take including what children expect from their companions, how they would like the relationship to function, the times, places and way in which the companions appear in their life and what they like and dislike about them. They believe that the answers to such questions will continue to provide information on the purpose and functions of these companions and the role that they play in children's development. Research fulfilling these expectations is much needed, as there are few studies that have investigated the phenomenon in a systematic, structured and qualitative manner (Hoff, 2005b). Some additional questions, such as the qualitative changes that may occur in the quality of the child-companion relationship, the possible development of the companion itself and the development of its purpose and function, will require a more longitudinal, qualitative approach. Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2004) believe that focusing on how the companions function may also provide information on the explanations behind some of established links between imaginary companion play and various developmental correlates as these remain poorly understood (Gupta & Desai, 2006).

Researchers have also highlighted the need for further examination of aspects of these children's play development and styles. Taylor et al. (1993) suggested examining the variations in children's play with high fantasy and low fantasy toys, although no study appears to have undertaken this objective. In addition, no research has thoroughly dealt with joint play involving imaginary companions and real friends at same time (Hoff, 2005b). The logistics involved in this form of play would be interesting to investigate, as would the characteristics of children who participate in

it, given that most children abandon their companions when real playmates are available. Additionally, peer acceptance for children with imaginary companions has only been examined in pre-school friendship groups; it would be interesting to expand this research to older school-aged children who have been found to have such companions given the higher levels of embarrassment and secrecy involved with this age group.

4. Conclusion

Although research into the phenomenon of imaginary companions has been undertaken since the early 1900's, many aspects of the phenomenon are still not well understood. In bringing together the current research findings and presenting a comprehensive overview of the literature, it becomes clear that the diversity and complexity of the phenomenon continues to present challenges to researchers. Positively, the association of imaginary companions with emotional disturbance has been put to rest and contemporary research has indicated that imaginary companion play should be allowed to flourish and may actually offer developmental benefits for the child. However, it is important that researchers do not get consumed by identifying statistically significant correlates and relationships, and investigate the quality of the impact an imaginary companion can have on a child's life. Future research in the area should be welcomed and encouraged.

Paper 2

THE NATURE, FUNCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGINARY FRIENDSHIPS

1. ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: *To explore the nature, function and development of the relationship that some children have with an imaginary companion.*

BACKGROUND: *The focus of much recent research on imaginary companions has been on comparing children who do and do not have one. Studies that gain a deeper insight into these relationships by detailing them in a more thorough, qualitative manner may provide additional information on the role that the companions play in children's lives.*

METHODS: *Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, with six Primary 3 children, in May and October of 2013. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.*

DISCUSSION: *The qualities of the imaginary companions were largely positive. A striking feature of the interviews was the sense of reality the children ascribed to their companion, yet they still held an awareness of the fantasy nature of the relationship. Over a five month period the accounts given by the children were remarkably consistent indicating the longevity of the relationships. An array of functions were discerned which resulted in the formation of an imaginary companion being viewed as a positive, creative and highly adaptive strategy to alleviate feelings of loneliness and boredom, provide companionship and friendship, provide help and assistance, and allow access to something unavailable in the real world.*

CONCLUSION: *This study contributed to the current body of research by investigating the phenomenon of imaginary companions as they are experienced by the child. With so few qualitative studies pertaining to imaginary companions, further research in this area should be welcomed and encouraged.*

2. Introduction

Children's friendships are an important topic for psychological research because, quite simply, friends matter to children (Dunn, 2004). The kind of friendship that children experience is an important consideration when attempting to understand the impact of friendship on children's development (Dunn, 2004). Therefore, to fully understand the impact of friendship experiences on children, it is essential that all kinds of friendships are included in research efforts. Early research investigating the relationships that children have with imaginary friends frequently suggested negative and serious explanations for these friendships such as trauma, emotional disturbances and social deficits (for a comprehensive review of the earliest work in the area see Klausen & Passman, 2007). However, although children with emotional and mental health problems do often have imaginary companions, recent research has clarified that many children have imaginary companions without such problems (Taylor, 1999) with contemporary academic literature emphasising the prevalence and normality of the experience. Yet, many adults remain unsure of what to make of this form of elaborate pretence (Taylor et al., 2009) with many parents expressing concern about whether the phenomenon should be embraced, ignored or actively discouraged (Majors, 2009; www.mumsnet.com).

2.1. Reported Incidence of Imaginary Companions

Recent studies have revealed that the creation of an imaginary companion in childhood is relatively common (Taylor, 1999) with estimates in studies varying from 17% (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999) to 52% (Hoff, 2005). In line with the peak of pretend play more generally (Woolley, 1997), it is frequently stated that the preschool period is the time when imaginary companions are most apparent (Coetzee & Shute, 2003;

Hart & Zellars, 2006) but studies have revealed that the experience can and does persist beyond this point. Taylor et al. (2004) report that having an imaginary companion was as common among 6-7 year olds (31%) as it was among 3-4 year olds (28%) while a large study conducted by Pearson (2001) revealed that although prevalence decreased with age, 19% of ten year olds, 14% of eleven year olds and 9% of twelve year olds reported having an imaginary companion. However, it should be noted that estimates of prevalence can be influenced by a number of methodological factors including the definition used, the age of the participants and the sources used to gather information.

2.2. The Definition of Imaginary Companions

Exactly what constitutes an imaginary companion has been a point of disagreement in the literature since research into the area began with key terms and definitions lacking consistency. Throughout the history of the field, an invisible form with whom a child interacts has been referred to as a pretend companion, an imaginary friend, an imaginary playmate, a make-believe companion and an invisible friend, with 'imaginary companion' being the most frequently used term in contemporary research.

One of the earliest working definitions for imaginary companions, was provided by Margaret Svendson, an American pediatrician in 1934. She defined an imaginary companion as:

> *"an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis"(pg. 988)*

However, despite this definition being frequently cited and respected as an early attempt at defining the phenomenon, the definitions used in more contemporary research vary (Hoff, 2005). A number of researchers include 'personified objects' – "physical objects that are imbued with personality characteristics" (Klausen & Passman, 2007, p.350) as a type of imaginary companion (Gleason, 2004b; Taylor, 1999; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Taylor et al. (2004) defined an imaginary companion as:

> *"a very vivid imaginary character (person or animal) with which a child interacts during his or her play and daily activities. Sometimes the companion is entirely invisible, sometimes the companion takes the form of a stuffed animal or doll. An example of an imaginary companion based on a stuffed animal is Hobbes in the popular comic strip 'Calvin and Hobbes'" (pg. 1176)*

A small number of researchers and theorists have also looked at 'impersonation' within the field of imaginary companion research, which involves a child assuming an imaginary personality and pretending to be that person every day for at least one month (Carlson and Taylor, 2005; Taylor et al., 2013). It has been suggested that 'invisible' friends, personified objects and personification are all sustained forms of pretence which require that a child imagines the thoughts, actions and emotions of another and gives voice to their experience (Harris, 2000) and may not differ greatly in terms of the level of imagination involved (Taylor, 1999). Harris (2000) suggests that these sustained forms of pretence differ mainly in accordance to the mode of pretence utilised – imaginary companions have no objective basis, personified objects are oriented towards an external vehicle (e.g. stuffed animal) and impersonation is oriented toward the self.

Presently, there is little empirical evidence indicating whether it is logical to combine these forms of pretence under one superordinate category. There is also the counter-

argument that interacting with an invisible entity is a striking, unique behaviour that is distinct from the other forms of pretend play (Taylor et al., 2009). First, while there is some perceptual support for the experience of a toy as a source of comfort and companionship, the comfort and companionship derived from a completely invisible entity is "more unambiguously cerebral" (Taylor et al., 2009, pg. 212). Additionally, many parents routinely animate stuffed toys for children and frequently engage in role play in which alternatives identities are assumed. It is however much less common for children to observe adults consistently interacting with an invisible entity (Taylor et al., 2009). The definition employed in the current study supports this argument and breaks with the current trend of inclusiveness to focus only on relationships where the child's imaginary companion has no objective basis.

2.3. Developmental Implications of Imaginary Companions

The focus of much recent developmental research has been on the identification of different child-specific correlates, by comparing children who do and do not report having an imaginary companion. Researchers have searched for these correlates across several domains and the various relationships that have been found are discussed heavily in the literature (see paper 1 for a comprehensive discussion of these findings).

Some of the most replicated findings in the literature are related to gender differences, with girls significantly more likely than boys to report having an imaginary companion (Brinthaupt & Dove, 2012; Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Gleason, 2004a; Pearson, et al., 2001; Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Taylor, et al., 2013) and more likely to report having multiple companions and companions of the opposite sex (Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Coetzee & Shute, 2003; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Taylor et

al. 2004; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Studies have also examined family composition and reported that first born (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, et al., 2000; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Trionfi & Reese, 2009), only children, (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, et al., 2000; Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and children with fewer siblings (Gleason, et al., 2000) are thought to be significantly more likely to engage in this pretence. Studies have also investigated possible associations between the presence of an imaginary companion and aspects of a child's personality and social behaviours. While some studies have indicated negative associations (Bouldin & Pratt, 2002; Harter & Chao, 1992; Hoff, 2005), overall there appears to be more personality and behavioural similarities than there are differences between the two groups (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Bouldin & Pratt, 2002; Gleason, et al., 2000; Gleason, 2004a; Manosevitz, et al., 1973; Taylor, et al., 2004).

A small body of research has also investigated the link between imaginary companions and developmental advantages relating to theory of mind and language skills. The interest in the relationship with theory of mind stems from the suggestion that there are functional similarities between pretence and false belief (Fador, 1992 as cited in Taylor & Carlson, 1997), however studies examining this association have reported mixed results (Taylor & Carlson, 1997; Davis et al., 2011). Research also indicates that the creation of an imaginary companion is related to the development of a variety of language skills including the production of more complex sentences (Bouldin, et al., 2002), more advanced receptive vocabularies (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), higher receptive verbal ability (Davis, et al., 2011), the production of richer narratives (Trionfi & Reese, 2009) and internalisation of private speech (Davis, et al., 2013). However, one important caveat relating to these findings is that the

relationships described are correlational in nature meaning that the relationship could conceivably go in either direction. In short, "there is no *causal* evidence for the benefits of imaginary companion play in any developmental domain" (Trionfi & Reese, 2009, pg. 1310).

2.4. Functions Served by Imaginary Companions

2.4.1. Theoretical Understanding

Both developmental and psychoanalytic theoretical orientations suggest that imaginary companions support key stages of child development and serve a facilitative function, assisting children in responding to environmental experiences and events. Psychoanalytic theory places emphasis on the child's social and emotional growth and many of the psychoanalytic writings on imaginary companions conceptualise the companion as being an aspect of the child's self, symbolically located outside the body as a separate other. Nagera (1969) suggests that the imaginary companion serves a positive purpose in the development of the child, relating to ego development and conflict resolution, and will disappear once its purpose has been realised.

Developmental theories are more concerned with the function the imaginary companion serves relating to the child's cognitive growth. Piaget (1962) referred specifically to imaginary friends in his work and maintained that, similarly to play in general, they served a mastery function by helping children to communicate, develop new skills, deal with difficult emotions and explore and adapt to their environment.Vygotsky (1978) also proposed that pretend play allows children to practise skills that are developing but not yet mastered. More recently, Harris (2000)

argued that sustained role play, including the presence of an imaginary companion, promotes the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child and creates a safe space for children to comprehend reality and make sense of their environment. Through a process called simulation, he suggests that role play allows children "to imagine the world from the point of view of another person" (pg. 48) which assists their understanding of the mental states of others.

2.4.2. Empirical Evidence

Contemporary research advises that, due to their diversity, imaginary companions cannot be easily categorised by function (Taylor, et al., 2004) and summarising the needs met by them is a complex task best undertaken on a case-by-case basis (Taylor, 1999). Taylor (1999) presents a variety of possible functions through the descriptions of case histories including loneliness, issues of competence, restrictions in one's own life, blame, fear, communicating with others and response to trauma, and deduces that the main reason imaginary companions are created is for fun and companionship.

To systematically investigate the functions of imaginary companions, Hoff (2005b) adopted a qualitative approach and conducted interviews with 26 ten-year-old children before carrying out thematic analysis on the transcripts. Five main themes emerged, namely: giving comfort and company (the most common theme extracted), providing self-regulation and motivation, enhancing self-esteem, expanding the child's personality and enriching the child's life. Interestingly, the most common reason given for the disappearance of an imaginary companion was the formation of new friendships or starting school, which also provides support for a 'companionship' function. Children also described how their companion could be a

real source of help from assisting them with their homework to teaching them how to be more inventive. The role of the imaginary companion as a way to alleviate loneliness and as a source of support for academic and emotional problem solving was also discussed by Burton (2010) following interviews with 10 primary school children.

More recently, Majors (2013) conducted semi-structured interviews with eight children aged between 5 and 11 years. Through the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it was established that all eight children mentioned friendship as a main purpose being served by their companion. Similarly, six of the children spoke about the alleviation of boredom that their imaginary companion provided. Additionally, Majors found that along with the provision of fun and entertainment, six of the children articulated receiving support from their companion during times of difficulty, with three children describing how contact with their friend enabled them to reduce angry or upset feelings.

2.5. Rationale for the Present Study

"The aim of qualitative research is to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations."

(Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, pg. 216)

By adopting a qualitative methodology, the current study aims to gain a deeper insight into the purpose, function and development of the relationship that some children have with an imaginary companion. Gaining deeper insights into these relationships is necessary as only a couple of studies have investigated the phenomenon in a systematic, structured and qualitative manner (Hoff, 2005b).

Adopting a qualitative stance and detailing these relationships from the child's perspective may provide information about the function the companion serves, how the experience affects the child and their motivations for creating the companion, in a way that quantitative studies cannot. Taylor et al. (2004) believe that focusing on how the companions function may also shed light on the explanations behind some of established links between imaginary companion play and various developmental correlates. It is also anticipated that this study might further inform our understanding of the phenomenon and address additional features of the child-companion relationship, e.g. the changes that may occur in the quality of the relationship over time, the possible development of the companion itself and the development of its purpose and function, by adopting a more longitudinal, qualitative approach that has yet to be undertaken in any previous studies.

2.6. Research Questions

The research questions remain broad as this study is concerned with the generation of ideas and hypotheses rather than the testing of a specific research question. The aim is to gain a deeper insight into the purpose, function and development of the relationship that some children have with an imaginary companion.

This aim will be met by answering the following research questions:

- What is the nature of the relationship that children have with their imaginary companions?
- What purpose and/or function does the imaginary companion have in their life?
- How stable is the child's relationship with their imaginary companion over time?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Six children attending mainstream primary school participated in the study. All children were in Primary 3 at the time of recruitment and were approximately 6-7 years old. This age range was selected due to the cognitive and linguistic development necessary to participate in an interview. Additionally, although it is frequently stated that the preschool period is the time when imaginary companions are most apparent, it has been found that they are as common among 6-7 year olds as they are among younger children (Taylor et al., 2004).

3.1.1. Recruitment Process

A local mainstream primary school (representing pupils from varying socioeconomic backgrounds) was contacted and invited to participate in the study. Two weeks before the initial screening session, information letters were sent home to all Primary 3 parents (n = 54) outlining the aims of the study and informing them that a researcher would be visiting the classroom to talk about imaginary friends (see Appendix 1). Passive parental consent was sought at this stage of the study and parents were asked to contact the school / researcher *only* if they wished to withdraw their child from participation. Passive consent was considered adequate for this phase as the discussion that took place with the children was similar to topics about imagination that appear in the primary curriculum.

On the day of the screening session, eligible children (n = 46)[4] were taken to an adjacent room in groups of 6 - 8. The classroom assistant was present for the screening process. Each child was given a questionnaire to determine their imaginary companion status and to ascertain if the child would be happy to talk about their imaginary companion if they had one (see Appendix 2). Before the questionnaire was completed, a discussion was had with the children about what an imaginary friend was. All words on the questionnaire were read aloud to the children. Images and colours were also used to aid understanding in the absence of literacy skills. Children who indicated that they both had an imaginary companion, and were happy to talk about that friend, continued to the next step of the participant identification process (n = 18)[5].

The names of the 18 remaining children were discussed with the two class teachers. Following the discussion, a joint decision was made to exclude 5 children from the study due to special educational needs (n = 1), proficiency in English (n = 2) and not engaging appropriately with the screening process (n = 2). Letters were sent home to the parents of the remaining 13 children seeking active consent for their child to participate in the interview phase of the study (see Appendix 3). Only children who received written parental consent were eligible to take part in an interview. Eight consent forms were returned to the school (61.5%) with 6 parents giving permission for their child to be included in the study.

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[4] *Eight children were ineligible for participation due to withdrawal of parental consent (n = 4) and absence from school (n = 4)*

[5] *Twenty children indicated that they did not have an imaginary friend. Eight children indicated that while they had an imaginary friend, they did not want to talk about it. The remaining eighteen children continued to the next step of the participant identification process*

3.2. Research Design

This study employed qualitative methodology to explore the insights and experiences associated with having an imaginary companion. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each child[6] at two separate time points.

		Interview 1	Interview 2
Child 1	**Eoin**	9th May 2013	4th October 2013
Child 2	**Sophia**	15th May 2013	4th October 2013
Child 3	**Chloe**	9th May 2013	4th October 2013
Child 4	**Evana**	10th May 2013	4th October 2013
Child 5	**Susan**	10th May 2013	4th October 2013
Child 6	**Laura**	24th April 2013	4th October 2013

Table 2: Timeline of interviews

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviewing is considered a "natural fit" for qualitative analysis (Smith, 1995, pg. 9) and is the most widely used method of qualitative data collection in psychology (Willig, 2001). It is considered the method most appropriate for this study as it is particularly well suited to research that aims to explore aspects of a person's life or their beliefs and perceptions about a personal experience (Smith, 1995; Willig, 2001). It is also considered an especially appropriate format for discussing topics that might be sensitive in nature (Fylan, 2005).

Although a semi-structured interview does involve the construction of an interview schedule, which requires the researcher to think about what the interview might cover and ensures that the original research question is kept in mind (Smith, 1995; Willig, 2001), it also retains a significant amount of flexibility.

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[6] *All names used are pseudonyms to provide anonymity to the participants*

In semi-structured interviews, both the order of the questions and the way in which they are asked are allowed to vary across respondents (Smith, 1995) which was considered especially important given the young age of the participants in this study. This would allow the format of the interview to take on a more conversational approach and allow for questions to be rephrased and explained if a child did not understand what was being asked. This method of data collection also allows the researcher the freedom to explore additional issues that the respondent might introduce (Smith, 1995). This was also considered important for this study as it acknowledges the child's role as expert of their own experience and allows them to tell their story without being constrained by the previously generated questions on the interview schedule.

3.3. Materials

Each interview was recorded on an audio recording device. Markers and colouring pencils were used to enable the children to draw pictures of their imaginary companion.

3.4. Procedure

The recruitment of participants was carried out as previously described.

One child was chosen at random to participate in a pilot interview at the end of April 2013. This pilot interview enabled clarification on the appropriateness of the interview format and content. Due to the consistency between the pilot interview and subsequent interviews, the data from the pilot interview was included in the analysis.

All interviews were conducted in an empty classroom in a one-to-one setting. The interviews lasted between 9 and 20 minutes (with an average of 15 minutes) and

were recorded on a dictaphone. Child consent at interview 1 was not presumed from the questionnaire and verbal consent was sought from each child before the interview started. Similarly, verbal consent was re-sought before the start of interview 2. Before each interview, the presence of the dictaphone was explained and children were assured that they could stop the interview at any time. Within the semi-structured interview all participants were asked the same questions. Additional questions were asked for clarification and elaboration when necessary. The full interview schedule and lists of questions for both interview 1 and 2 can be found in Appendix 4. At the end of each interview children were invited to draw a picture of their imaginary companion.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

This study has been granted full ethical approval by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University (see Appendix 5). The research procedure for obtaining consent and protecting the well-being of research participants was guided by the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (2004).

3.6. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The two data sets were analysed together to answer the first and second research questions regarding the nature and function of the imaginary companions, and separately to answer the third research question regarding the stability of the relationship over time. All interviews were transcribed verbatim (see Appendix 6 for a selection of interview extracts). One participant's account (Child 4) was so inconsistent that is was deemed unusable and

was not included in the analysis. (An extract is available in Appendix 6 and the full interview transcript is available on request).

3.6.1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic method due to its suitability in "elucidating the specific nature of a given group's conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study" (Joffe, 2011, pg. 212).

To ensure that the methods used for thematic analysis were transparent and robust, Braun and Clarke's (2006) template for analysis was used. These guidelines, devised for those wanting to conduct thematic analysis "in a more deliberate and rigorous way" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 77), offer a 6 step guide for conducting thematic analysis in psychological research. Table 3 briefly summarises each of these steps as they apply to the current study. (See Braun and Clarke [2006] for a comprehensive description of each phase.)

Themes, defined as "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 82) or as a "specific pattern of meaning found in the data set" (Joffe, 2011, pg. 209), can be identified in different ways. This study used inductive thematic analysis to analyse the interview data and identified themes at a semantic level. This form of inductive or "bottom-up" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 83) analysis is content driven, resulting in themes that are strongly linked to the interview data and have an exploratory and descriptive orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Coding and theme development took place at a semantic level or "within the explicit or surface meaning of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 84). Patterns were identified from the words that

the participant said and were then described, summarised and interpreted in an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns in relation to relevant literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Six Phases of Thematic Analysis		
Phase 1	Becoming Familiar with the Data	• Transcription • Repeated reading of data • Noting down initial ideas • *See Appendix 6 for transcription of interviews*
Phase 2	Generating Initial Codes	• Identifying and coding interesting aspects of the data • Coding systematically throughout the data set • Combing data relevant to each code • *See Appendix 6 for data coding*
Phase 3	Searching for Themes	• Identifying relationships between codes • Organising the codes into potential themes
Phase 4	Reviewing Themes	• Ensuring data within themes cohere meaningfully together • Re-reading entire data set • Generating thematic map • *See Appendix 7 for thematic map*
Phase 5	Defining and Naming Themes	• Ongoing refinement of themes • Clearly identifying what each theme is • Naming themes • Identifying any sub-themes
Phase 6	Producing the Report	• Telling the story of the data • Selecting appropriate extract examples • Discussing what is interesting about the themes and why • Relating themes back to research questions and literature • *See the 'Results' and 'Discussion' sections of the report*

Table 3: The 6 steps of thematic analysis conducted, as described in Braun & Clarke (2006)

3.6.2. Validity and Reliability

The interview data and analytic process were viewed and discussed with a member of the psychology staff team to ensure the validity of the chosen themes. Using an additional person familiar with qualitative methods to co-assess the data and provide a 'credibility check' is important in ensuring the quality of qualitative research (Elliott, et al., 1999).

4. RESULTS

Themes that were deduced from the analysis (see Appendix 7) were clustered according to their pertinence to the research questions to form three superordinate themes (see Appendix 8):

1. The nature of children's friendships with their imaginary companions
2. The development of the relationship over time
3. Functions of the imaginary companions

During the analysis it became evident that the individual themes under each superordinate theme were interlinked and closely related to each other. However, there is sufficient evidence to discuss them as separate entities. Following the guidelines for quality qualitative research presented by Elliott et al. (1999) specific examples of each theme will be provided to both illustrate the analytic process and to allow readers to consider possible alternative meaning and understandings.

4.1. Superordinate Theme 1: The Nature of the Relationships with Imaginary Companions

All children described their imaginary companions in detail and were able to explain how the companion fit into their lives. These descriptions enabled a picture of the nature of the child's relationship with the companion to be constructed.

The information provided by the children formed the following five themes:

- Relationship as fantasy and/or reality
- Similarity to self
- Autonomous nature of the imaginary companion
- Child in control
- Public and private dimensions of the relationship

4.1.1. Relationship as Reality and/or Fantasy

The children gave detailed, concrete descriptions of their imaginary companions, who had a wide range of characteristics (Appendix 9 shows the characteristics and drawings of the imaginary companions for each participant). Three of the children had human companions and two of the children had animal companions. The way that the children could easily detail the companions' physical and personality characteristics gave a sense that, although imaginary, they felt very real to the child. The details provided were very specific and distinctive at times.

"She has a pink and yellow top with orange trousers and white shoes...she's got blue eyes with glasses and yellow hair"

(Laura, Interview 1)

"He is a black and white cat...and he has really long whiskers"

(Susan, Interview 2)

"He is brown...and blue eyes...a small tail...and he is small"

(Sophia, Interview 2)

"Well she has got brown hair and its like wavy and she's got blue eyes"

(Chloe, Interview 1)

The children also provided details of the companion's personality traits, as well as things that the companion like to do.

"He's playful and he's...he's really good at puzzles"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

"Well her favourite colour is pink and she also likes yellow"

(Laura, Interview 2)

"He likes drawing...he likes playing in the garden and he likes playing catch with the ball"

(Susan, Interview 2)

The reality that the children assign to their imaginary companion and to the relationship itself can be seen in the way that some children perceive their companion to occupy space in the real world and act on the world in various ways. Eoin's unnamed imaginary companion takes up space in his bed while Laura's companion Molly requires a seat in school.

"I can't go to sleep...and it is a bit squishy cause he always turns around"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

"she usually goes into P1 because there is a spare seat there"

(Laura, Interview 1)

At times, some of the children spoke about needing to hide their imaginary companion from other people indicating the sense of realness that they ascribed to their companion in that moment.

"She goes to school but I hide her so no one knows"

(Chloe; Time 1)

"the doorbell rang so my nanny was there so I had to hide her under the bed"

(Laura; Time 2)

Conversely, the children also spoke of, and recognised, the fantasy nature of their friend and in some cases there was a mixture of both reality and fantasy dimensions to the child's imaginary companion. Despite expressing the need for their companion to be hidden from others, both Chloe and Laura also recognised that they were the only people to whom the companion is visible.

"sometimes when I am playing alone in the playground or something she just suddenly appears and then plays with me but everybody thinks that I am playing alone but I'm not"

(Chloe, Interview 2)

"we went to see the giraffes and my mum let me take a picture so Molly was like standing beside the giraffes but I was the only one who could see her"

(Laura, Interview 2)

Additionally, the children in this study seemed comfortable using the term 'imaginary friend' themselves and with the interviewer using it, implying an acknowledgment of the fantasy nature of their friend.

4.1.2. Similarity to Self

Three of the children had 'human' companions, each of which were similar to the child themselves in some way. One of the first things Eoin mentioned about his companion Ben was that he had the same colour skin as him. Eoin is of Asian origin and it is telling that he chose to highlight this characteristic. It is possible that sharing this characteristic with Ben might help him feel less alone in this.

"he has the same colour skin as me"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

Chloe and Laura also described their human companions as being similar to themselves in terms of age, physical appearance and interests.

"I like that she is kind of nice to me and the same age as me, so she is not like a lot older than me. And her favourite colour is the same colour as mine"

(Chloe, Interview 1)

"She likes doing things that I like doing as well"

(Chloe, Interview 2)

"she looks a bit like me"

(Laura, Interview 2)

4.1.3. Autonomous Nature of the Imaginary Companion

The descriptions the children gave of their imaginary companions activities gave a sense that, although created by the child themselves, the companion was invested with a sense of independent agency, existing and acting separately from the child.

Interestingly, as well as describing the independent personality characteristics and interests of the imaginary companion (noted previously), some of the children spoke about their imaginary companions' lives when not with them. Sophia and Laura spoke of the imaginary companion existing independently from them while they are on holidays, while Eoin implied that during the school day Ben is bored and lonely without him.

"he stays with my cousins...he loves it"

(Sophia, Interview 2)

"She stayed in my room and looked after it and kept an eye on the house and made sure no one came in"

(Laura, Interview 2)

Sometimes Ben comes to school when he thinks he is going to be bored without me"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

Whilst the vast majority of the interactions with companions were spoken about positively, Eoin and Susan mentioned times when their companions prevented them from falling asleep, with Eoin in particular voicing his dislike for things that his imaginary companion does.

"I can't go to sleep...and it is a bit squishy cause he always turns around"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

"He runs around my bed and I can't get to sleep"

(Susan, Interview 2)

Eoin was the only child who explicitly mentioned negative interactions when asked if there was anything he didn't like about his companion. Ben was described by Eoin as annoying both him and his sister to the extent that he involves his mother.

"sometimes he annoys me when I do my maths...by playing noisy things" ["What does he do?"] "Puts on the Wii very loud...I get annoyed and then I can't concentrate and then I have to tell my mum"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

"Ben keeps on annoying my sister when she is playing with her things...when she is playing with Lego, when she is done, he breaks it"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

Here, the quotations above serve to demonstrate a context where the children felt and described the imaginary companions as having some sort of autonomy and independency of 'will' and described the imaginary companions as having an existence beyond the child as well as displaying unwanted behaviours in their interactions with the child.

4.1.4. Child in Control

While a sense of companion autonomy is apparent, the children do exercise control over the imaginary companion and elements of the relationship.

The majority of the children were explicit in describing how they dictated when the imaginary companion appears.

"I ask him and then he comes"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

"I call him...he comes"

(Sophia, Interview 1)

"I just sort of say her name and then I kind of see her"

(Chloe, Interview 1)

"I just say 'cat' and then he comes'

(Susan; Interview 1)

It was also apparent that often, the companion does exactly what the child would want them to do, with the child 'getting their own way' in the interaction. This was especially salient when the girls were discussing decisions and choices relating to games that they like to play.

"she always lets me choose a name that I really like best even though it's her favourite name as well and then she picks a different name"

(Chloe, Interview 2)

"she always lets me win in games and lets me go first"

(Laura, Interview 2)

4.1.5. Public and Private Dimensions of the Relationship

Children were asked who knew about their imaginary companions and it was anticipated that some children might share their companion with family and friends while others may choose to keep it private. In some cases there was a mixture of both private and public dimensions to the child's imaginary companion.

Three of the five children revealed that other people knew about their friend. By the second interview, this had increased to four out of five, with only Susan's companion remaining completely private.

When asked who knew about his imaginary companion, Eoin chose to make a distinction between people who knew about his companion and those that actively interacted with him. His distinction conveys a 'two-tier' level of awareness about his friend with his sister afforded greater access to the relationship.

"my sister, my dad, my mum and my best friends...they only know about him but my sister plays with him too"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

Interestingly, when the same question was asked during the second set of interviews the number of people who were aware of the imaginary companion had increased for all children except Susan. This increase was greatest for Sophia who, during the first

interview, stated that nobody knew about her companion. Five months later this number had increased significantly with many people aware of Chelsea's existence.

"my mommy, my daddy, my sister and my 2 cousins...and my cousins dog knows about him too"

(Sophia, Interview 2)

4.2. Superordinate Theme 2: The Development of the Relationship Over Time

By returning to speak to the children five months after the initial interview the longevity and stability of the relationship could be explored. Relationship stability and continuity was strong for four of the five children. Eoin had a new 'unnamed' imaginary companion and Ben was no longer his friend.

For the four children who had the same companions, the consistency between the two time points was striking, both in the descriptions and drawings of their companions.

The images drawn by Laura and Susan can be seen in tables two and three overleaf. All other drawings along with characteristics of the companion at each time point can be found in Appendix 9.

The consistency between the two time points extends beyond physical characteristics. During both interviews Sophia described how she and Chelsea play on their bikes together, Susan described how Sammy is kind, funny, and cheers her up whenever she is sad and Laura restated that Molly's favourite colour is pink.

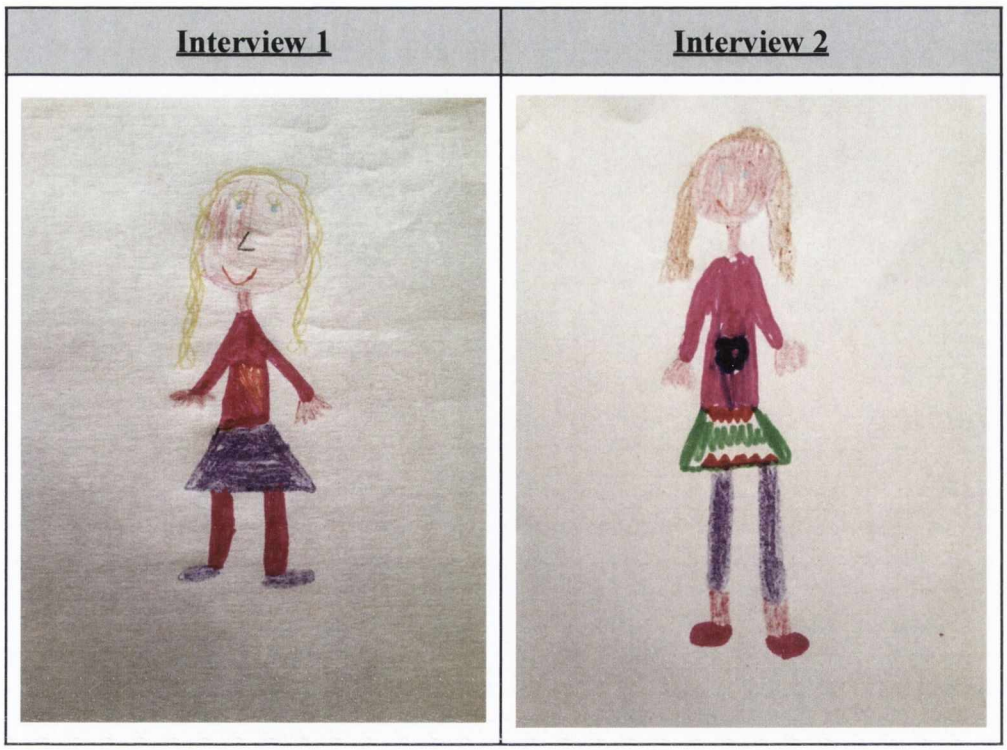

Figure 1: Drawing of Molly at Interview 1 (May) and Interview 2 (October)

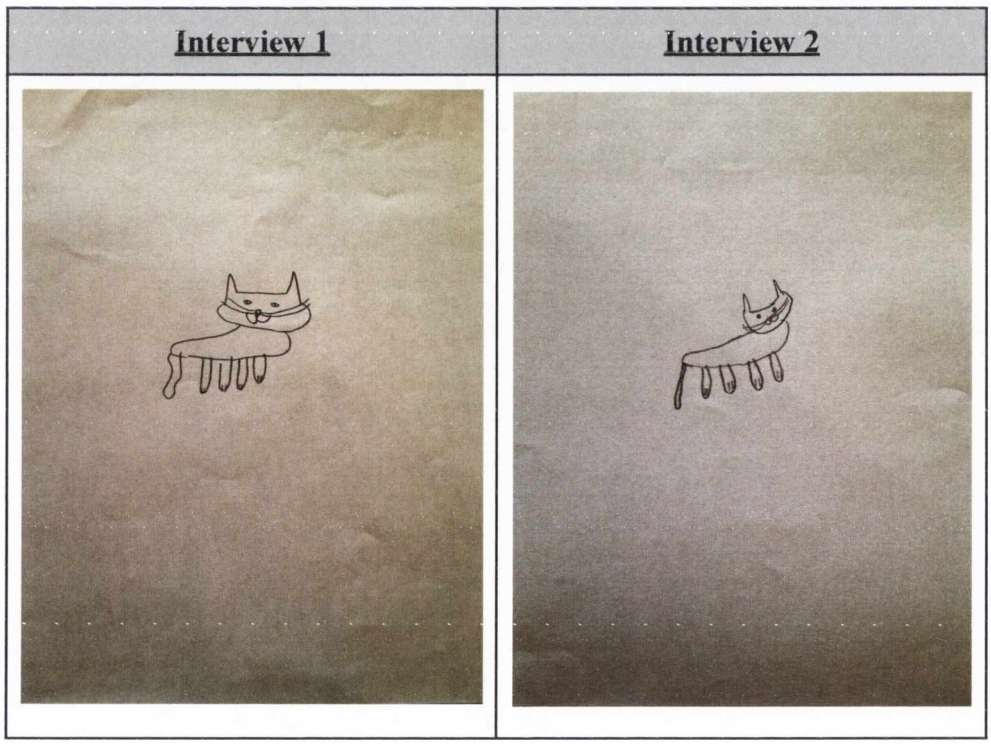

Figure 2: Drawing of Sammy at Interview 1 (May) and Interview 2 (October)

Given that the relationships with the companions had lasted a minimum of five months, (the children gave varying ages and times at which they first met their companion), it can be inferred that the relationship is most likely of some importance to the child. Indeed, when asked how long the companion would be their friend for, the children had difficulty foreseeing the end of the relationship.

"til I die"

(Laura; Interview 2)

"Forever"

(Sophia, Interview 1)

The children also expressed strong emotions at the prospect of the relationship ending which is explored further on in the paper (see superordinate theme 3).

However, despite not being able to forsee the end of their own relationship, the children recognised that imaginary companions were not needed in adulthood and associated the loss of an imaginary companion with growing up, getting busier and having a family of their own.

"my dad and mum don't have any...because mums and dads are really busy"

(Eoin; Time 2)

["Do you think some adults have imaginary friends?"] "No...because they are too old"

(Sophia; Time 2)

"because if they are married they have got each other and they have got their children to look after"

(Laura, Interview 2)

Susan thought that adults might remember the imaginary friends from their childhood revealing the important role that Sammy occupies in her life. Although she doesn't forsee an imaginary companion playing an active role in an adult life, she hopes the companion will be remembered.

4.3. Superordinate Theme 3: Functions of the Imaginary Companion

Children were asked questions about what they liked and disliked about their companion, and why they thought some children may or may not have one, to provide information on the possible functions they served for the child. Children were not asked directly what purpose they thought the companion served for them as it was thought that young children might have difficulty responding.

The responses formed three key themes:

- Alleviation of loneliness and boredom
- Companionship and friendship
- Access to something unavailable

Two additional themes were present in the data although they contained less supporting evidence across the interviews and pertained mainly to one or two children. These themes are:

- Provision of help and assistance
- Apportion of blame

4.3.1. Alleviation of Loneliness and Boredom

The alleviation of loneliness and boredom was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews.

The children were asked how they would feel without their imaginary companion. There was an overwhelming sense that the four girls would feel exceptionally lonely if their companion was to disappear with some of them suggesting that their companion was their only real friend. However, it should be recognised that Chloe and Sophia both mentioned a number of 'real' friends that they played with alongside their companions. The repeated use of the word 'lonely' can be seen in the quotations below.

"Lonely...and then I would have no friends at all"

(Sophia, Interview 2)

"Well I would feel lonely and my friends often aren't at home so I'd feel very lonely"

(Chloe, Interview 2)

"I would have no-one else to play with because I have no brothers or sisters and em...I don't really do anything else at home"

(Susan, Interview 2)

"Quite lonely cause I only have a brother who is a boy"

(Laura, Interview 2)

Similarly, when asked why people in general might have an imaginary friend, the four girls all reported that having such a companion would relieve feelings of loneliness.

"If they are alone and if they have nobody to play with they can play with their imaginary friend"

(Sophia, Interview 1)

"they feel lonely, and...they want more friends to be around them when they are home"

(Susan, Interview 1)

"they might not have somebody else to play with when they are alone in the house"

(Laura, Interview 1)

"They might like to have one so when they are lonely they can play with them"

(Chloe, Interview 1)

Conversely, when asked why some people do not have imaginary friends, further support for the role of the companion as a buffer against loneliness was provided. Sophia explained how an imaginary companion wouldn't be needed if people "have all their friends" and Laura thought that a companion was unnecessary if someone had brother and sisters to play with. Interestingly, Susan thought that people who didn't have one might "like playing by themselves", indicating that she herself may not like the experience of solitary play.

Through both the hypothetical answers about themselves and the answers about others, it was clear that the imaginary friends of these four girls were significant others in their lives and fulfilled a specific purpose relating to loneliness and isolation.

Interestingly, Eoin did not place the same emphasis on loneliness. His companion appeared at times of boredom when others were unavailable for play. 'Bored' was a reoccurring word throughout Eoin's interview.

"Cause when I'm bored I can't play anything so I ask my imaginary friend"

"He plays with me when I'm bored"

"Sometimes when I'm bored and my sister is gone to her friends and I can't do anything"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

Similarly to the girls, when asked why other people might have an imaginary friend his emphasis on the reduction of boredom continued.

"they can play with them when they are bored like me"

(Eoin, Interview 1)

4.3.2. Companionship and Friendship

All children spoke of enjoyable interactions with their imaginary companions. At times the companion appeared to function as just that - a presence that offered the child companionship and company at school, on family outings and at extracurricular activities. However, through the children's description of their companions and their concrete examples of sharing common activities, a real sense of friendship is conveyed. Activities were varied and included playing cards and board games, playing on bikes and swings and doing arts and crafts. In fact, the accounts of interactive play provided by all five children would still make sense if they were talking about 'real' friends. These descriptions also strengthen the sense of reality that the children assign to the relationships (see superordinate theme 1).

"we play like card games and board games like monopoly and wii games"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

"he plays with me...we play on the swing outside my back. ["what other types of things do you play?] "we play on my bike...somebody throws the ball and if they tip the bike they can be on the bike"

(Sophia, Interview 1)

"We play loads of board games...we play chess...and guess who...we play tip outside...we run around and there is a den and if he tips you then you are it and you have to try to chase him"

(Susan, Interview 1)

The children spoke with enthusiasm about their companions and a sense of fun, enjoyment and happiness was evident. The repeated use of the word 'we' by all the children also indicates the sense of togetherness that they experience.

Some of the children were also explicit about the conversational elements of their interactions with their companion. For Susan, these conversational exchanges were a source of comfort and support at times of difficulty in her life.

"He is always kind when I'm sad...he is never mean at me or cross.... he says nice things to make me happy whenever I'm sad...he says things like, he tells me jokes to make me laugh"

(Susan; Interview 1)

Her description of the support she receives from her imaginary companion constitutes a significant difference from 'real' people in that even with close friends and family members there is a risk that they might be mean or cross at times. Chloe mentioned that her companion Rosie was "always happy", a quality that is also difficult to find reflected in a real world relationship.

Similarly to Susan, the other four children also commented on the positive characteristics of their companion such as being kind, playful, fun, a good friend, friendly, happy, funny and nice. These positive qualities are those that would be sought in a 'real' friendship and they appeared to be admired and appreciated by the children. Thus, throughout the interviews there was a strong sense that the companions were very friendly and had a special relationship with the child.

4.3.3. Access to Something Unavailable

What also became clear was that for some children, their imaginary companion provided them access to something that was otherwise unavailable.

For Eoin, Sophia, Susan and Laura their companion offered them a type of sibling companionship that was not available in their homes for various reasons. Laura stated that her imaginary companion was a girl because she has no sisters.

"she is a girl because I only have a brother so if I am lonely I can play with her"

(Laura, Interview 2)

When Susan was asked how she would feel if her imaginary companion went away, she revealed that she is an only child and that Sammy provided her with companionship in the home.

"I would have no-one else to play with because I have no brothers or sisters and em...I don't really do anything else at home"

(Susan, Interview 2)

Although she has a sister, Sophia described an ongoing situation of sibling conflict and while she was not explicit about Chelsea fulfilling a sibling role it is plausible that Chelsea may have offered her companionship when it was unavailable within the home. For Eoin, Ben provided access to a playmate when his sister was temporarily unavailable.

Chloe described how she plays with Rosie when her other friends are not available.

"When my friends aren't playing with me...when we are not playing she plays with me outside"

(Chloe, Interview 1)

The quotations above serve to demonstrate situations where the imaginary companions enabled the children to overcome boredom and loneliness by providing them access to an alternative relationship when friends and siblings were unavailable.

In addition to the sibling conflict described above, Sophia also indicated that her companion, Chelsea the dog, may have been created partly as a substitute for the real dog that she would love to have and in order to replace a pet that has passed away. She spoke about her cousin's current dog and her grandmother's late dog (who was also called Chelsea) during the interviews, indicating that she was getting one of her own soon.

"he has a dog too" ["and do you have a dog at home?] "(shakes head) but I am getting one"

(Sophia, Interview 1)

Thus, the imaginary companion provided a level of wish fulfilment in a range of circumstances and enabled the children to have an imaginary experience of what they would like to be available to them in the real world.

4.3.4. Provision of Help and Assistance

For some children, the imaginary companion appeared to be a way to problem solve, both academically with homework, and emotionally with social situations. The companions provided motivation for the children to perform better at their school work and for Sophia, acted as a social coach enabling her to interact better with real playmates.

"He does my maths with me...there is a sheet everyday and you do it everyday after school and...we do it"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

"She also gives me a test...tests on my numbers and spellings on a Thursday night"

(Laura, Interview 2)

"She helps me with problem solving sometimes. She gives me a problem and I have to solve it and if I can't solve it she helps me"

(Laura, Interview 2)

"He is a good friend...and he helps me...playing...and making friends"

(Sophia, Interview 2)

4.3.5. Apportioning Blame

Although this function was not very frequent, it appeared that the companion may have been used by two of the children as an entity on which to place blame. As already discussed (see superordinate theme 1), both Eoin and Susan reported that the actions of their imaginary companion prevented them from doing something that was expected of them by stopping them from going to sleep. Eoin also explicitly mentioned negative behaviours that his imaginary companion Ben engaged in, including distracting him from his homework and destroying his sister's Lego creations. Interestingly, Eoin had a different companion at the latter interview who also engaged in disruptive behaviours resulting in Eoin's sister becoming upset and involving their mother.

"He says it's really bad when my sister does something really good"

(Eoin, Interview 2)

The same behaviours being demonstrated by two different companions belonging to the same child may indicate that the behaviour serves a specific purpose for the child. In Eoin's case the companion may be used as scapegoat on which to blame mischief.

5. Discussion

5.1. Prevalence of Imaginary Companions

Although this was not a quantitative study, the screening process for suitable participants also produced some interesting results that are worthy of discussion. 56.5% of the children in this study indicated that they had an imaginary friend. Estimates in published studies vary from 17% (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999) to 52% (Hoff, 2005). Therefore, this was a particularly high number of 6-7 year old children who were part of a mainstream primary population, with a demographic mix of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Despite it frequently being stated that the preschool period is the time when imaginary companions are most apparent (Coetzee & Shute, 2003; Hart & Zellars, 2006), such a high prevalence among children of this age lends support to other studies that have found that the experience can and does persist well beyond this point (Pearson, 2001; Taylor et al., 2004).

5.2. The Nature of the Children's Relationships with their Imaginary Companions

The children gave detailed descriptions of their imaginary companions. The companions consisted of both humans and animals, had ordinary, recognisable names and showed a diverse range of characteristics which were mostly positive or neutral. A striking feature of the interviews was that the children spoke about their companions in a manner that made them seem real. Interestingly, the three children with 'human' companions described their companion as being similar to them in some way. Majors (2012) reported likewise, as did Gleason (2004) on research carried out by Mauro (1991). Identifying their companion in this way bears

resemblance to 'real' friendships where children are attracted to peers who resemble them racially, behaviourally, emotionally, attitudinally and developmentally (Rubin, 2004), with these perceived similarities providing a stepping stone to trust and friendship (Dunn, 2004). Endowing their companions with such similar characteristics may be a way of developing a connection and friendship with them. Majors (2013) also suggested that the similarities may serve to bolster the child's self esteem, particularly if the companion has admired qualities to which a child might aspire. As well as describing physical appearances and personality characteristics of their companions, the children also mentioned other types of sensory experiences (e.g. being squashed in bed) and the descriptions suggested that many of the children had visual, auditory and tactile experiences of their companion. This supports other studies that report multi-sensory experiences, and that many children experience daily conversational exchanges with their companion (Honeycutt et al., 2011-2012; Taylor et al., 2009). Additionally, although the imaginary companion lacks a physical reference in the real world, it was evident that they were more than just inner experiences with the children experiencing a palpable sense of 'company' in real life situations. The children also described situations where their companion essentially crossed the 'pure fantasy' boundary by requiring space in the real world, providing empirical support for the anecdotes frequently provided in the literature (Gleason, et al., 2000).

The children's relationships with their companions were also characterised by a dynamic interplay between the extent that the children described their companion as an autonomous agent or as an entity controlled by themselves. Similarly to a 'real' friendship, in most cases there was a combination of the child exerting control at

times, contrasted with the companion having independence of 'will' at other times. It may seem counterintuitive that the children would experience their companion as having an independent sense of will, but the descriptions the children gave of their imaginary companions activities gave a sense that, although created by the child themselves, the companion was invested with a sense of independent agency, existing and acting separately from the child. Other research has also commented on this interesting characteristic of the relationship (Hoff, 2005b; Majors, 2013; Taylor, 1999). Hoff (2005b) also noticed signs of independence in children's companions and referred to companions who showed two or more manifestations of independent behaviour as 'deep characters' in comparison to 'shallow characters', who did not show the same level of autonomy. It has also been suggested that children who experience this 'deep' level of independent agency with their companions are likely not to consciously conceptualise the companion as part of the self (Taylor et al., 2009). Indeed, in the current study, there was no evidence of the children considering their companion as an extension of themselves. At the same time however, the children were seen to exercise some control, with the companion appearing whenever the child desired and being compliant and amenable during play activities.

Although this air of reality that the children assigned to their imaginary companions could raise questions about their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, it was clear that this was not the case. Supporting findings of others studies (Hoff, 2005b; Majors, 2012; Taylor et al. 1993; Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008) it was evident that the children did not experience confusion between fantasy and reality. All children were comfortable using the term 'imaginary friend' and while they may have assigned a sense of reality to their companion, they never explicitly maintained

that their companion was real, with some children recognising that they were the only people to whom the companion is visible.

The extent to which the companion was kept private or made public was also a central feature of the nature of the relationship. Initially, three of the five children revealed that other people knew about their friend. By the second interview this had increased to four out of five, with all four of these children reporting that more people now knew about their companion. Past research has described how the sharing of an imaginary friend with others is typical of a much younger child (Singer & Singer, 1990) but in the present study, children were sharing their companion as late as seven years of age. Similarly, Hoff (2005b) found that some children were content to share their companion with others at eight years of age although the overall level of privacy afforded to the child-companion relationship was much higher with 14 out of 26 children saying that their imaginary friend was a secret. There are a number of factors which can influence the level of secrecy or openness that children assign to their relationship including parent support and encouragement (Singer & Singer, 1990) and societal context and expectations (Carson, Taylor & Levin, 1998). While parental attitudes were not examined in this study and no child referred to adult views on the matter, it is possible that the initial interview may have changed the child's perception of the social context by giving the children 'permission' to talk about their companion in a safe place with a receptive and interested listener, which may have allowed them to discuss their companion with additional family members and friends more freely. It is also plausible that the awareness that other children being interviewed had imaginary friends also, may have further encouraged the sharing by somewhat normalising the experience. It is

also noteworthy that the child who chose to keep her companion profoundly private was the only child to emphasise the emotional support and comfort and that her companion gave her. It may be that the companion was kept private as it was satisfying the emotional needs of the child compared to functioning as a play companion or being a vehicle for the imagination, although this proposition warrants further investigation.

5.3. The Development of the Relationship over Time

A new finding that was generated by the current research project that does not appear to have been identified in any other piece of empirical research pertaining to imaginary companions is the consistency and stability of the child-companion relationship, and the companion itself, over time. The results revealed that over a five month period the accounts given by the majority of children were remarkably consistent and included physical characteristics (both articulated and through drawings), personality characteristics and preferred activities. As well as emphasising the longevity, and inferred importance, of the relationship to the child, it could also be argued that this finding lends support for the child's account of their own experience. Although previous research efforts have shown that children are willing and able to describe and provide information about their imaginary companion in rich detail (Burton, 2010; Hoff, 2005b; Majors, 2013), opinions still exist that using children as the sole source of information runs the risk that a companion is created impulsively during the interview (Gleason, 2002) or that a real friend is described instead of an imaginary one (Taylor et al., 2013). It could be argued that by interviewing the children twice, and obtaining continuity and consistency, the authenticity of the child's experience can be inferred.

It was also apparent that all children assumed that their relationship with their companion would continue and many children expressed reluctance at the idea of parting with their companion and had difficulty foreseeing the end of the relationship. However, when children were asked about 'adults' having imaginary companions they were able to recognise that it was unnecessary to have a companion past a certain age. It is possible that asking the children about these feelings indirectly provided a safe space in which to explore them. The children's inability (or reluctance) to apply the same thinking to themselves could indicate their level of emotional investment in the relationship. The strong feelings of importance and necessity that the children had for their companions could also signify that the companions were serving a useful purpose or function for the children.

5.4. Functions of the Imaginary Companions

Contemporary research advises that, due to their diversity, imaginary companions cannot be easily categorised by function (Taylor, et al., 2004) and summarising the needs met by them is a complex task (Taylor, 1999). The array of functions discerned in the present study did not apply to every child-companion relationship and some relationships had features that pointed to more than one function.

Similarly to other studies, the alleviation of loneliness and boredom as well as the provision of companionship and friendship were central aspects of the child-companion relationships (Burton, 2010; Hoff, 2005b; Majors, 2013; Taylor, 1999). There was an overwhelming sense that the four girls would feel exceptionally lonely if their companion was to disappear and they all mentioned the reduction in loneliness that an imaginary companion brings. Interestingly, the only boy in the group did not place the same emphasis on loneliness and his companion appeared to

provide relief from boredom. Although the sample size was too small to generate any conclusive gender difference, this contrast is noteworthy and calls for further investigation. Although the feelings of loneliness and boredom may be experienced differently, both indicate time spent alone. The ability to play alone for sustained periods of time is gradually developed from the age of three (Piaget, 1962) and it is plausible that the creation of an imaginary companion may represent a transitional phase during which some children get used to being on their own when they would rather have company.

At times the accounts provided by the children went beyond describing their companion as a mere means to reduce loneliness and boredom to convey a genuine sense of friendship. The activities described were varied and the accounts of interactive play provided by all five children would still make sense if they were talking about 'real' friends. All the children highlighted the friendship quality of their companions who were described as having positive personality characteristics, liked playing with the child and in one case, someone from whom comfort and emotional support could be sought. This conceptualisation of imaginary companions as a type of 'real' friend is further supported in the literature by Gleason (2002) who hypothesises that a single cognitive schema may underlie children's relationships with both their imaginary companion and their 'real' best friends, due to the statistically similar levels of social provisions afforded to both relationships. Friendship in middle childhood is described as a relationship that includes companionship, intimacy and affection, with reciprocity considered a particularly crucial feature (Dunn, 2004). Interestingly, although an imaginary friend could be considered a one-directional relationship and thus not fulfilling the 'reciprocity'

required in true friendship, Gleason and Hohmann (2006) found that imaginary friends were conceptualised in a similar way to 'real' reciprocal friends and not 'real' unilateral friends. The children's descriptions of their relationships, taken together with these findings, suggest that in terms of purposes served, the imaginary companions may fulfill some similar purposes as 'real' friends.

In fact, some of the characteristics afforded to the companions (e.g. always kind, never mean, always happy), suggest that they may constitute the 'ideal' friend. This was also noticeable when the girls were discussing decisions and choices relating to games they like to play. Descriptions of their companions allowing them to choose the game and allowing them to win suggested that it was easier for these children to enjoy themselves if they were in full control of their games, which their imaginary companion allowed. Even in the best of friendships there are likely to be times of misunderstanding, disagreements and tension. The imaginary companion however, can possess "all of the positive qualities of supportive relationships in that he/she stimulates intimate self-disclosure, maintains secrecy, offers closeness and companionship while at the same time is not an agent of conflict" (Seiffge-Krenke, 1997, pg. 150). One child appeared to take comfort from using their imaginary companion as an emotional outlet and confidant at times of difficulty in her life. Burton (2010) compares this method of intimate self-disclosure to therapeutic strategies such as keeping a journal as a way to process feelings that are currently too difficult to discuss with others. Although this role of the companion was not evident in any of the other child-companion relationships, the idea of the imaginary companion as a positive way of talking through emotional difficulties warrants further investigation.

The unmistakable presence of these two themes could be taken to support the widely held assumption that imaginary companions are created by socially isolated children as a replacement for the real thing. Gleason et al. (2000) remark that "one of the most common notions concerning imaginary companions is that they may compensate for a child's poor social relationships or loneliness" (pg. 420). Although this study did not seek the opinions of parents or teachers and therefore cannot comment on adult perceptions of the child's peer relationships, two children did explicitly mention a number of their real friends, while others positioned their loneliness against a lack of practical access to friends and siblings on occasion, implying that their imaginary friends were not wholly a substitute for real friends. Interestingly, one of the children who described positive interactions with real peers did also state that she would have no friends if her companion left her. It could be argued that her strong emotional response to envisaging life without her companion may demonstrate her emotional investment in the relationship and the strength of its importance to her, and not reflect a true absence of additional friendships per se.

The use of the imaginary companion to alleviate loneliness and provide friendship is closely related to the idea of the imaginary companion as a way to access something unavailable. This purpose fits somewhat with Majors's (2013) category of 'wish fulfillment' and Hoff's (2005b) category of 'life enhancement'. As already mentioned, an imaginary companion offered some children companionship due to a lack of practical access to friends and siblings on occasion. For others, it appeared that the companion may have been created in part to experience something that was not currently available to them in the real world on a more enduring basis e.g. female

companionship in the absence of a sister, sibling companionship as an only child and a dog in the absence of a longed for pet.

For some children, the imaginary companion appeared to be a way of accessing help and assistance and it enabled them to problem solve, both academically with homework and emotionally with social situations. The imaginary companion providing support in this way has also been noted elsewhere (Burton, 2010; Hoff, 2005b; Majors, 2013). The children described seeking help from their companion and thus avoided external sources of assistance. In this way, the imaginary companion could be seen as fostering independent working skills and enabling the child to rely on their own resources to complete a task. The idea of the imaginary companion as a source of assistance is paradoxical given that they are creations of the child's own imagination. However, given the representation of this function in the literature, the use of an imaginary companion as a problem solving strategy does appear to be a successful way to generate solutions for some children. A possible hypothesis is that by 'discussing' the problem with their companion, the child engages in self-talk or verbalisation, which guides their thought and actions, helps to focus and maintain attention, and results in better learning and achievement (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978; Schunk, 1999). Verbalisation can also create a sense of personal control which can increase the child's self-efficacy (Schunk, 1998), which is the child's belief in their own ability to complete a task (Bandura, 1986). This is significant as self-efficacy influences a range of academic behaviours including effort, persistence and performance (Schunk, 1999). It is also plausible that self-efficacy could also be protected or enhanced by avoiding the use of external sources of assistance.

Although not prevalent, there were some examples which supported Taylor's (1999) category of 'deferment of responsibility'. Burton (2010) and Hoff (2005b) also report that while there was some evidence of this function among their participants, it was a theme with limited evidence. Two of the children reported that their companions prevented them from going to sleep. Hoff (2005b) also found instances of some children interacting with their companion at bedtime and suggests that at this time, many parents have stopped reading to their children and expect them to go to sleep independently, and that interacting with their companion may be an intermediary step before the child has learned to go to sleep on their own. Only one of these children continued to mention other occasions when their companion engaged in destructive or negative behaviours that had an impact on other people. This type of scapegoating is considered immature and characteristic of younger children (Nagera, 1969). It is plausible that continuing to use the companion in this way may be a form of relinquishing responsibility for inappropriate behaviours in order to reduce guilt and maintain a feeling of self-worth (Hoff, 2005b).

Consequently, the formation of an imaginary companion could be viewed as a positive, creative and highly adaptive strategy to alleviate feelings of loneliness and boredom, provide companionship and friendship, provide help and assistance, and allow access to something unavailable in the real world. Similarly to many strategies that provide support and assistance, it is plausible that the companion will not be needed as children learn fully independent methods to provide these functions for themselves. This would fit in with common pattern of imaginary companions fading over time as the child continues to mature.

5.5. Limitations of the Current Study

The current study produced many interesting findings and has given some insight into the nature, consistency and purpose of the relationships that children have with their imaginary companions. However, there are some potential limitations to the study which will be acknowledged.

First, all the children were from the same primary school and, although the school represented children from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, this may have limited diversity in the population. The study also included only one male child in the participant sample. A larger sample of both girls and boys may have enabled exploration of potential similarities and differences in the nature or function of the relationships between the two groups. The restricted age-range and exclusion of children who were perceived as unable to engage fully in the interview process could also be seen as a weakness of this study. However, this decision to focus on a specific cohort of children also increased the homogeneity of the sample thus allowing greater insight to the experiences of children in early middle childhood. Second, Robson (1993) commented that interviews under half an hour are unlikely to be highly valuable. As the individual interviews in this study ranged from 9 to 20 minutes it is possible that the length of the interviews could be viewed as a limitation. However, both children were interviewed twice, increasing the total amount of time spent engaged in the interview process. Additionally, it was felt that the children were given the space and time to disclose any further thoughts and feelings and given their young age, longer interviews may have been an unreasonable demand.

5.6. Directions for Future Research

With so few qualitative studies pertaining to imaginary companions, further research of this kind should be welcomed and encouraged. Supplementary research may reveal additional functions as well as potentially providing support for those already hypothesised. Further longitudinal studies, which investigate the child-companion relationship over time, are required. Others possible avenues for research arising from this study are the potential relationship between the degree to which the companion is shared with others and the function it is serving for the child, as well as the differing influence that loneliness and boredom may play in the creation of a companion for girls and boys respectively.

Paper 3

A Critical Evaluation of, and Personal Reflection on, the Research Process

1. Introduction

This paper aims to justify the rationale for the decisions made during the research process and addresses the reliability and validity of the study. It also comments on the implications of the results for future practice and enquiry. Finally, a personal reflection on the process is provided.

2. Rationale for the Research Topic

As discussed in paper 1, the study of imaginary companions is important for a number of reasons.

First, the high prevalence rate of imaginary companions (estimates suggest that between 17% and 52% of children report having one) would suggest that friends of this type are present in the lives of many children. The kind of friendship that children experience is an important consideration when attempting to understand the impact of friendship on children's development (Dunn, 2004), therefore it is essential that friendships of this kind are included in research efforts.

Second, despite the prevalence of the phenomenon, many adults, including parents and psychologists (Majors, 2009; www.mumsnet.com; Wachter, 2011), remain wary of their presence in children's lives. Exploration of the role that these friends

typically play in children's lives could help to clarify whether these concerns are warranted.

Lastly, while there are clear examples of detailed work being undertaken by researchers on imaginary companions, there appears to be a lack of studies investigating the phenomenon in a systematic, structured and qualitative manner. Consequently, there is an underrepresentation of children's individual voices within imaginary companion research.

As a result, the author was interested in eliciting the experiences of the children and detailing these relationships from the child's perspective.

3. Rationale for Research Design and Methodology

3.1. A Longitudinal Qualitative Approach

This research aimed to gain a deeper insight into the nature, function and development of the relationship that some children have with an imaginary companion. Adopting a quantitative approach to such a question would not have enabled the production of rich, quality data of the children's experiences (Willig, 2008). A qualitative approach was favourable as it allows us to "understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations," (Elliott et al., 1999, pg. 216). Adopting a qualitative stance and detailing these relationships from the child's perspective, may provide information about the function the companion serves, how the experience affects the child and their motivations for creating the companion, in a way that quantitative studies cannot.

A longitudinal approach, where the same children were interviewed five months on, was adopted to address a gap in the literature in relation to the stability and development of the child-companion relationship over time. This repeated interview approach constitutes the unique contribution of this research as it has yet to be undertaken in any previous studies. Although it would have been optimal to re-visit the same children again at a third period and continue to document their relationship with their companion, two time-points with a five month interval is all that was feasible given the time constraints of the current study.

3.2. Selection of Participants

The first key decision made was whether parents and / or children should be used as active participants in the study. As discussed in paper 1, various opinions have been presented in the literature on the use of the parent or the child as the primary source of information on imaginary companions with some studies using the child as the only source of information and others seeking the opinions of both parents and children. The research aims and questions were used to guide this decision. The research aimed to explore the nature, function and development of the relationship that children have with imaginary companions and, as fantasy play and imaginative activity are not easily accessible to parents (Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008), the quality and depth of the information that could be provided by parents was questioned. Additionally, studies have shown that a parent's information beyond the mere existence of the companion is not very informative (Gleason, 2004b). Many studies use parent corroboration as a criterion necessary for identifying a child as having an imaginary companion. Again, this reliance on parent opinion was questioned as it runs the risk of excluding children who do not tell their parents about their

companion. Excluding children on the basis that their parent disagrees with their account of their reality is an uncomfortable position to take as it implies that the child's experience is irrelevant, or indeed untrue, if they have not explicitly shared that experience with specific others. Children are skilled communicators when researchers use methods that are sensitive to their competencies (White, Bush, Carpena-Mendez & Ni Laoire, 2010) and multiple research efforts have shown that even young children are willing and able to describe and provide information about their imaginary companion in rich detail (Mathur & Smith, 2007-2008; Majors, 2013). Consequently, a child-centered approach was adopted and the child was granted the role of expert on their own experience.

Following on from the decision to have children themselves as the only source of information on their imaginary companions, a screening procedure had to be put in place to identify those children who both had an imaginary companion and were happy to participate in the research from those who did not. The screening procedure and process of obtaining consent is described in detail in paper 2. In short, the brief questionnaire contained two questions pertaining to the presence of an imaginary companion and to their willingness to discuss their friend. Passive parental consent was sought for participation in the questionnaire phase and active parental consent was necessary for inclusion in the interview phase.

Children are viewed as "dependants or incompetents" (Yee & Andrews, 2006, pg. 401) and thus the consent of an adult who is "in loco parentis" (BERA, 2004) must be sought before children can be included in research. However, the decision on whether active or passive parental consent needed to be obtained, where parents *document* or *retract* permission respectively (Pokorny, Jason, Schoeny, Townsend, &

Curie, 2001), was carefully considered. For inclusion in the questionnaire phase of the study, passive parental consent was sought and parents were asked to contact the school / researcher *only* if they wished to withdraw their child from participation. Ethical issues can arise with this approach as it assumes that parents received, read and understood the information about the study that was sent to them. However, passive consent was considered adequate for this phase as the discussion that took place with the children was similar to topics about imagination that appear in the primary curriculum. The use of passive consent at this stage of the research was approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University.

The questionnaire was supported by visual images and was read aloud to the children to enable completion in the absence of literacy skills. The study was explained to the children and their right to withdraw from the study without repercussion was stressed. A strength of this particular screening process was that it allowed the children an opportunity to withdraw from the study silently, without the pressure of being asked directly either alone or in front of their peers. It could be argued that the fact that eight children indicated that while they had an imaginary friend, they did not want to talk about it is a testament to the accessible opportunity that children were given to withdraw from the study. This is particularly important as the presence of authority figures can influence children's participation (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). Power differentials between adults and children are inevitable and difficult to remove (Einarsdóttir, 2007) and researchers must be aware of the challenge this poses as pupils may feel they must participate, as most school activities are compulsory

(Morrow & Richards, 1996). Consequently, it was felt that this study addressed this challenge appropriately and successfully.

Discussion with the class teachers led to five children being excluded from the study due to special educational needs (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder), proficiency in English and not engaging appropriately with the screening process. Although there was not an exact sample size being aimed for, "an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question" (Marshall, 1996, pg. 523) and therefore, excluding some children at this phase was deemed appropriate as this was not a randomised study and the final participants had to be able to engage in the interview process and provide the insight and understanding required for the research questions to be answered.

Informed consent was necessary for inclusion in the interview phase of the study. Of the eight consent forms that were returned to the school, two parents had chosen to actively withdraw their child at this stage of the research. Five parents withdrew their child through non-return of consent forms but it is unknown whether these withdrawals were deliberate or unintentional. The fact that seven children who participated in the questionnaire phase through passive consent did not obtain informed consent to continue to the interview phase highlights the higher rates of participation that passive consent obtains (Schuster, Bell, Berry, & Kanouse, 1998). It is possible that these parents did not receive or read the information sent about the questionnaire phase or perhaps they were comfortable with their child participating in a group activity but not a one-to-one interview. Either way, it is clear that re-establishing consent when the child's level of participation in the research changed was very important.

The current study addressed both child and parent consent issues appropriately which resulted in six participants who all had the active consent of a parent / guardian as well as expressing informed consent for themselves on three separate occasions - during the questionnaire phase and before both interviews.

The six participants who participated in the research were all P3 students (aged approximately 6-7 years old) and attending the same mainsteam primary school. This age range was selected due to the cognitive and linguistic development necessary to participate in an interview and as it is within the age range typically included in research on this topic. Selecting children who were all of similar age also increased the homogeneity of the sample. This was considered important as it is possible that the role that imaginary companions play in children's lives may vary according to the age of the child and similarity of age allowed more reasonable comparisons to be made across the sample. Although the participant pool was restricted to one school which may be seen as limitation, the school did represent pupils from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. One of the participants was of Asian origin. No controls were put in place for ensuring equal numbers of boys and girls and the final sample was unbalanced with only one boy. An equal gender distribution would have been preferable and may have enabled tentative comparisons to be made between the experiences of boys and girls.

3.3. Individual Interviews

As discussed in paper 2, semi-structured interviewing is considered a "natural fit" for qualitative analysis (Smith, 1995, pg. 9) and is the most widely used method of qualitative data collection in psychology (Willig, 2001). It was considered the method most appropriate for this study as it is particularly well suited to research that

aims to explore aspects of a person's life or their beliefs and perceptions about a personal experience (Smith, 1995; Willig, 2001). Although a semi-structured interview does involve the construction of an interview schedule, it also retains a significant amount of flexibility, which was considered important given the young age of participants. The questions used in previous qualitative studies on this topic were consulted and used as a starting point from which the interview schedule was developed. Having these predetermined questions in mind allowed the original research question to be kept in mind and kept the interview flowing when the children had run out of things to say on a particular topic. In this sense, it provided benefits to the interviewer which were particularly welcome as it was the first qualitative study to be undertaken by the researcher. At the same time, the structure of the interview allowed the children ample space, time and opportunity to talk about themselves and what was important to them and to bring their own ideas to the interview, which are recommended when asking children to talk about topics personal to themselves (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). The research design which included a screening session and two separate interviews also lent itself to the establishment of ongoing rapport with the children as the same researcher was present at all time points. It is likely that this also helped the children to be comfortable enough with the researcher to engage in the interview process.

Some of the children seemed to be reassured by the knowledge that other children being interviewed most likely had imaginary companions too. At the second interview, one child mentioned sharing her imaginary companion with one of the other participants since the first interview. Therefore it could be supposed that a focus group may have provided the children with a sense of group safety and

belonging through shared experience. However, some of the children did not mention sharing their companion with other participants and one child in particular kept her companion completely private, and a focus group may have prevented them from discussing certain aspects of their experiences in the presence of others (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Therefore, the semi-structured interview that was used was considered the most appropriate method for data collection.

3.4. Drawings of Imaginary Companions

Children's drawings are thought to "represent a potentially rich and informative view of a child's world" (White, 2010, pg. 146). At the end of each of their interviews, children were asked to draw a picture of their imaginary companion. The opportunity to draw their companion was included to allow the children to express themselves in an additional way that did not rely on verbal communication and to provide an alternative source of data. All children fully engaged in the drawing process. There was initial discussion with a member of psychology staff concerning the timing of the drawing i.e. should the drawing take place before or after the interview. It was decided that the drawing should be completed after the interview as the concern arose that children may base the conversational exchange on their drawing and may feel constrained to align their opinions with what they drew. As the drawing was a secondary aspect to the data collection it was decided that completing the drawing at the end of the interview would be preferable. Information garnered from the process indicated that this may have been the case with some children stating that their companion didn't quite look like the drawing as they had difficulty representing their imaginary image on paper. Additionally, children were asked specifically if they would draw a picture of their companion. As a result, all drawings consist of just the

imaginary companion. It is possible that further information could have been extracted from drawings that placed the companion in context within a fuller picture. Consequently, a broader question may have been advantageous. However, getting the children to draw their companion twice did result in powerful visual data that helped to explore the stability of the companion over time. Deeper analysis of the children's drawing may have proved interesting however it is noted that analysis of such visual data can be difficult as drawings are often ambiguous (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

4. Rationale for the Method of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic method due to its suitability in "elucidating the specific nature of a given group's conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study" (Joffe, 2011, pg. 212). Additionally, as it is not intrinsically linked to any theoretical position (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2011), it was suitable for use with the critical realist epistemology which was adopted. To ensure that the methods used for thematic analysis were transparent and robust, Braun and Clarke's (2006) template for analysis was used.

Prior to thematic analysis being confirmed as the method of choice. Two other methods of data analysis were briefly considered. Narrative analysis which is defined as "an organised interpretation of a sequence of events" (Murray, 2003, pg. 113) was originally considered as it was thought that it would allow the child's narrative over time i.e. between the two interviews to be explored. However, following the interviews, an in-depth discussion was held with a member of the psychology staff who is skilled in numerous methods of qualitative analysis and it was decided that there was not enough time, either chronologically or developmentally, between the two interviews for this to be a realistic possibility. Interpretative phenomenological

analysis (IPA), which "aims to explore the research participant's experience from his or her perspective" (Willig, 2008, p. 57), was also briefly considered. However, IPA is a method which aims to explore how people are perceiving and making sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008) which, given the children's young age, would be of less relevance. Additionally, as well as making sense of their experience, the participants need to be able clearly to articulate it. As such, using IPA with P3 children was deemed inappropriate.

The analytical process followed the steps outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). For the most part the process was straight forward and the steps taken and resulting themes and issues can be read in detail in paper 2. However, during both interviews with Child 4, it became evident that the child was uncertain and hesitant with what she was saying and clear inconsistencies emerged when the transcripts were transcribed. Initially, as this child's description of the companion and the relationship was so different from the others in a number of ways e.g. extreme nature of her friends (hybrids between different animals), inconsistencies in her description of the friend from one sentence to the next (including name of companions), escalating nature of the fantasy element of her story as the interview continued, a negative case analysis was initially considered. This would have involved discussing parts of this child's data that contradict themes and patterns emerging from the data of the other five children. However, due to the high level of inconsistency and contradiction, and following a lengthily discussion with a skilled qualitative researcher, the decision was made to exclude the data from analysis. In such cases it is suggested that discarding the data is an acceptable response (Shenton, 2004). The reasons for the child's inconsistency are unknown. It is possible that the idea of being removed from

class and being involved in the research process was preferable to remaining in class. The one-to-one attention and time that results from participation may also have been considered attractive. An extract of this interview is included in appendix 6 along with the other interview transcripts to ensure transparency.

5. Research Validity and Reliability

Ensuring a high level of validity and reliability in qualitative work is particularly important as it has been suggested that qualitative researchers "pose a threat to traditional notions of psychology as a science" (Morgan, 1998, pg. 488). However, it has also been argued that through high validity and reliability, qualitative researchers can ensure the quality of their work and can emulate the scientific method (Thyer, 2001).

Shenton (2004) expands on Guba's (1981) earlier work and details four criteria and associated provisions that can be employed by qualitative researchers in order to demonstrate the rigour and trustworthiness of their work. These criteria will be used to demonstrate how the current research stands up to recommended validity and reliability standards.

5.1. Credibility

Termed 'credibility' by Guba (1981), this construct is a qualitative-specific term for 'internal validity.' In quantitative studies, this construct is concerned with whether a study measures what it is believed to measure, while in qualitative studies, researchers are concerned with the congruence of the findings with reality (Merriam, 1998). Shenton (2004) describes a number of indicators that demonstrate the credibility of a qualitative study including *the adoption of research methods well*

established; random sampling; triangulation; tactics to help ensure honesty in informants; iterative questioning; peer scrutiny of the research project; member checks; thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny; and examination of previous research findings. Consequently, this study demonstrates its credibility in a number of ways.

First, this study adopts a well established research method. Semi-structured interviewing was used for all interviews and is the most widely used method of qualitative data collection in psychology (Willig, 2001). It is also a method that has been successfully used in previous, comparable imaginary companion research.

Second, the study did employ some methods of triangulation which "increases validity by incorporating several viewpoints and methods" (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012, pg 156). The use of triangulation is thought to enhance confidence in the research findings as it can verify and support details provided by participants (Bryman, 2004; Shenton, 2004). Methodological triangulation which involves using more than one method or data collection technique (Denzin, 1970) was employed in this study by interviewing the children again, thus cross verifying the same information across time.

Third, numerous efforts were made from the outset to ensure honesty from the participants in line with Shenton's (2004) recommendations. All children were given the opportunity not to participate to increase the probability that only those who genuinely wanted to participate did so. Participants were encouraged to be honest about whether they had an imaginary friend and about their willingness to discuss the topic. The fact that some children indicated that they did not want to discuss their imaginary friend indicates that the appropriate steps were taken to ensure that

children felt comfortable to express this right. Children were again given the opportunity to withdraw from the study before each interview although none expressed the desire to do so.

Fourth, iterative questioning was also used throughout the interviews. Probing questions were used to encourage the children to provide more detailed descriptions and rephrased and repeated questions were used across the two interviews. Although these techniques were not specifically employed to uncover "deliberate lies" (Shenton, 2004, pg. 67) they did result in contradictions and inconsistencies being revealed. As already discussed, one participant's account (Child 4) was so inconsistent that it was deemed unusable and was not included in the analysis. This decision was made following a discussion with a member of the psychology staff team experienced in qualitative research and is in line with recommended actions to be taken following the detection of presumed fabrication (Shenton, 2004).

Fifth, as mentioned above, the study was subjected to scrutiny by members of the psychology staff team, including one who is particularly experienced in qualitative research, as well as the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University. Comments and opinions from these individuals were welcomed and all suggestions were adopted.

Sixth, detailed descriptions and specific examples of each theme were provided to both illustrate the analytic process, to convey the actual words spoken by the child and to allow readers consider possible alternative meaning and understandings. Providing descriptions in this way is also recommended by Elliott et al. (1999).

Lastly, all results were discussed in relation to previous research findings. This allowed congruent and novel findings to be determined.

However, there are some credibility indicators that the current study did not demonstrate.

The study did not employ random sampling of participants. Although random sampling is thought to remove bias in the selection of participants (Shenton, 2004) and ensures unknown influences are distributed among them (Preece, 1994), random sampling is not the most effective way to investigate human behaviour or specific human experiences (Marshall, 1996). In random sampling all members in a population have equal chances of being selected and that was not the case in the current study. Purposive sampling, the most common sampling technique in qualitative research, where participants are selected because of some particular characteristic, was used to select participants who both had an imaginary friend and who were most likely to engage in the interview process and provide the insight and understanding required for the research questions to be answered.

Second, the children's views of their experience were the only views sought and no attempt was made to elicit the views of parents which meant triangulation between different information sources was not possible. It is possible that this could be viewed as a threat to the study's credibility. For reasons already discussed it was decided to grant the children the role of expert on their own experience and not seek the opinions of any significant adults in their lives. Although using children as the sole source of information runs the risk that a companion is created impulsively during the interview (Gleason, 2002), it was decided that interviewing the children a second time would greatly reduce the risk of spontaneous creation going unnoticed

with equivalence of responses over time providing a useful credibility check (Thyer, 2001).

Third, there was no opportunity to bring the results back to the children. This could be seen as a limitation as the nature of the children's relationships with their companions and the function of those relationships as communicated in this research may not have been considered accurate by the children. However, when necessary, immediate checking of the accuracy of the data was sought when it was unclear what a child had said or meant by a comment.

5.2. Transferability

Termed 'transferability' by Guba (1981), this construct is a qualitative-specific term for 'external validity' and is concerned with the generalisability of the research findings. However, the goal of this study was to detail the experiences of a sample from a specific population - P3 children who self-reported as having an imaginary companion - and not to present a standarised set of results that can be generalised to all children with an imaginary companion. Also, as the participants were same-aged, typically developing children attending mainstream school, they cannot be considered representative of any children outside of these criteria. Additionally, a stringent sampling procedure is usually seen as a precursor to generalisability to a larger population (Schofield, 2002) and, as discussed previously, this study employed purposive sampling. However, the comprehensive description provided of the phenomenon under study, the explicit methodological design and procedures and the verbatim excerpts provided throughout paper 2 will allow readers to gain a proper understanding of the study and therefore enable them to compare other instances of the phenomenon with those that have been described here.

5.3. Dependability

Termed 'dependability' by Guba (1981), this construct is a qualitative-specific term for 'reliability' which centres on the idea of replicability of results. Meeting the criteria necessary for dependability is difficult in qualitative work (Shenton, 2004). To ensure dependability, sufficient detail should be provided to allow other researchers to repeat the study, without the same emphasis on the replication of results. To enable researchers to repeat this work, paper 2 includes detailed sections on the research design and methodology and the procedures of data collection and analysis. Other researchers argue that reliability in qualitative research comes from the coherence of findings from more than one person analysing the results (leCompte & Goetz, 1982 as cited in Thyer, 2001). Similarly to most qualitative studies (Thyer, 2001), no explicit calculation of inter-rater reliability was calculated. However, all data collection and analysis was conducted under the close supervision of a psychologist skilled in qualitative research.

5.4. Confirmability

Termed 'confirmability' by Guba (1981), this construct is a qualitative-specific term for 'objectivity.' Demonstrating confirmability involves taking steps to ensure that the results are a reflection of the content of the interviews and the experiences of the participants and not the beliefs, assumptions and preferences of the researcher. It requires the researcher to remain impartial and unbiased. It has to be recognised that the subjectivity of the researcher is relevant throughout the research process, from the choice of topic, formulation of research questions, selecting methodology and analysing the data (Ratner, 2002). Through personal experiences knowing children with imaginary companions and extensive background reading in the area, it became

evident to the researcher that despite the concerns of parents and the media, as discussed in paper 1, imaginary companions are a prevalent phenomenon with no documented adverse effects on children. It is from this standpoint that the research was conceived, conducted and completed. However, the involvement of a member of the psychology team who is experienced in qualitative research went a long way to ensure that the data were collected, analysed and reported in an impartial way. Ongoing discussion explored proposed and alternative interpretations and ensured researcher interpretations resonated with the raw data.

6. Implications for Practice

It is anticipated that the findings of this study will be of use to both child practitioners and to researchers by adding to the body of evidence that attempts to understanding the nature of the relationships children have with their imaginary companions and the functions served by them. The research findings of the current study, coupled with the published literature in the area, indicate that imaginary companions are relatively common and are present in the lives of typically developing school-aged children. It also provides evidence of the importance and longevity of these relationships for children and the range of positive functions served by them. As research evidence is gathered it is important that it is made accessible to parents, teachers and relevant adults working with children in order to address their concerns discussed earlier in the paper. In this way, the responses of adults to the phenomenon will come from a position of awareness, understanding and knowledge.

Clarification of the nature of the relationships that children within a normative population have with their imaginary companion may also be of relevance to clinical

practitioners and researchers for comparison purposes. McLewin and Muller (2006) identified that the imaginary companion of children with dissociation identity disorder sometimes act against the good of the child. This has not been found in normative populations and could potentially represent a distinction between normal and clinical expressions of the phenomenon. Consequently, the current study, along with supporting evidence from other publications, could facilitate the identification of any worrying features of an imaginary companions of at an earlier stage.

7. Implications for Future Research and Enquiry

The contribution of this study is that it investigated the phenomenon of imaginary companions as they are experienced by the child, by exploring the nature and consistency of these relationships and the purposes they may serve in the child's life. With so few qualitative studies pertaining to imaginary companions, further research in this area should be welcomed and encouraged. Supplementary research may reveal additional functions as well as potentially providing support for those already hypothesised. Although this study made the first attempt at investigating the child-companion relationship over time, more longitudinal studies are required. The timeframe in this research spanned five months and studies following children's relationship over a longer period would be insightful in allowing possible changes in the quality and function of the relationship to be explored as the child matures.

The current study also speculated that the degree to which the companion is shared with others may be related to the function it is serving for the child, although further research is necessary to explore this possibility. Another possible avenue for research arising from this study is the different emphasis placed on loneliness and boredom,

by the girls and boy, respectively. Interviews with a larger sample of girls and boys would enable such comparisons to be more fully explored.

8. Personal Reflection

The work on this research project that has taken place over the last three years has presented moments of challenge and thankfully, many more moments of satisfaction.

The greatest challenge of this research was the choice of a qualitative methodology. All previous research projects in which I have been involved have had a strong quantitative focus and therefore, many features of the qualitative process were completely new. The aspect of the qualitative method which challenged me most was conducting the semi-structured interviews. Before this study, I was completely inexperienced in research interviewing. Conducting background reading on the process of constructing and carrying out such an interview was helpful and the support of my supervisor at this time was invaluable. The difference in my level of apprehension between conducting phase 1 of the study which involved questionnaires and phase 2 which involved the interviews was palpable. Initially I was concerned with possible silences during the interviews and how I would expand and guide the conversation without asking leading or closed questions. Conducting a pilot interview and getting feedback from both my supervisor and an experienced qualitative psychologist put me at ease somewhat as they both reported that the data collected were adequate for the research purpose. As the rest of the interviews continued they appeared to be very short in duration despite my best efforts to keep the children talking. This concerned me as during my background reading, I had read that interviews under half an hour are unlikely to be highly valuable (Robson, 1993). Again, discussion with my supervisor proved extremely helpful and, despite the short

length of the interviews, it was felt that the data collected were illuminative and that the children were given the space and time to disclose any further thoughts and feelings that may have wanted to disclose. However, the possibility remains that the quality of the data may have had an impact on the subsequent analysis and findings.

A second aspect of the process that I found challenging was excluding the data of one participant from the analysis. Initially, the idea of removing a participant because their data did not 'fit' seemed inappropriate and unethical, a position that probably followed me from my background in quantitative research. Reaching the final decision to exclude the data took a significant amount of time and reflection. Eventually, I came to understand that the data were not being discarded because they did not 'fit' but because the level of inconsistency and contradiction made them unfit for inclusion. When the decision was made to exclude the data, a parallel decision was made to include an excerpt of the interview in the appendix to ensure transparency and to ensure that the child's participation in the study was recognised despite the reservations about the data's authenticity.

Thankfully, the process of conducting the thematic analysis on the data was relatively straightforward. I appreciated having a standard format to follow as I felt confident that I was conducting the analysis appropriately and as a result I feel that Braun and Clarke's (2006) paper is an invaluable resource for any researcher conducting thematic analysis.

Finally, when I presented my proposal for the research, I underestimated the relevance that understanding the function of imaginary companions would have for educational psychology. Initial background reading of published literature revealed few links between imaginary companion literature and the profession. However, in

the interim, a doctoral paper by a practising educational psychologist was located (Majors, 2009) in which she reports that in her work as an educational psychologist she has been asked if imaginary companions were a positive or negative feature in a child's life and whether parents should be concerned by their presence. More recently, following the presentation of this research at a conference for educational psychologists, I was contacted by a service in England looking for information about the phenomenon as it was pertinent to a number of ongoing cases and relevant information was proving difficult to come by. Consequently, I now believe that ongoing research by educational psychologists is important as it may help information about the phenomenon to be distributed within the profession. This will enable psychologists to respond to questions and concerns from a position of awareness, understanding and knowledge.

In conclusion, the work that I have undertaken on this project over the last three years has only served to strengthen my belief in the power of qualitative research in documenting the thoughts and experiences of young children. It gave me the opportunity to greatly enhance my skills in research interviewing and the careful analysis and presentation of written data. Working closely with a supervisor allowed me to improve my problem solving skills and work through the challenges that were presented. I hope that I have done the children justice and left the reader with a clear sense of the important relationships that they have with their imaginary companions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Parent Information Sheet (1) and Consent Form (1)

Dr Harry Rafferty
School of Psychology
David Keir Building
Queen's University
Belfast
BT9 5BP
Northern
Ireland

Dear Parent / Guardian,

My name is Caoimhe McCarthy and I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist in Queen's University, Belfast. Educational psychologists are frequent visitors in all schools and your child may or may not have received support from these services in the past. I am very interested in children's imagination and I am conducting some research into the relationship that some children have with imaginary companions. The creation of an imaginary companion in childhood is relatively common, yet little is known about what children make of the experience. I am hoping to explore the function and development of these relationships from a child's perspective. It is hoped that this research will promote understanding of this common childhood experience.

I will be visiting your child's class on _____ to ask the children about imaginary companions. During this class visit, should your child wish to take part, he/she will be asked if they have an imaginary companion. If your child indicates that they do have an imaginary companion, he/she may be invited to participate in an additional short talk with me on a future date. Please note that this will not happen without your prior knowledge and written consent.

If you do not want your child to take part in the classroom discussion, please return the attached reply slip to your child's school as soon as possible.

If you have any queries in relation to this letter then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanking you in advance,

Yours sincerely,

_____

Caoimhe McCarthy, Trainee Educational Psychologist

Consent Form

I do not want my son/daughter _____(child's name) to take part in the research
on imaginary companions.

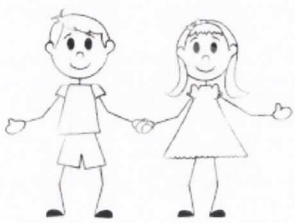
Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 2: Child Questionnaire

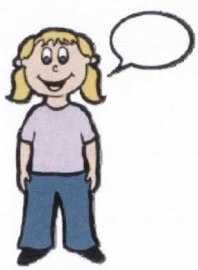
My name is _____

1. Do you have an imaginary friend?



Yes No

2. Are you happy to talk to me about your imaginary friend?



Yes No

Appendix 3: Parent Information Sheet (2), Consent Form (2) and Interview Information

Dr Harry Rafferty
School of Psychology
David Keir Building
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast
BT9 5BP
Northern
Ireland

Dear Parent / Guardian,

My name is Caoimhe McCarthy and I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist in Queen's University, Belfast. I am very interested in children's imagination and I am conducting some research into the relationship that some children have with imaginary companions. As you may recall, I recently visited your child's classroom to talk to the children about imaginary companions. During this visit, your child indicated that he/she currently has an imaginary companion and that they would be willing to discuss this in greater detail with me. I am writing to you to ask you to consider giving consent for your child to participate in two short discussions with me about their imaginary companion. Further details about these interviews are provided on the attached leaflet. It is hoped that the information gained from these interviews will make a valuable contribution to understanding why children have imaginary friends and to understanding more about the development and stability of the relationship.

I would really appreciate if you could indicate on the attached consent form if you agree to your child taking part in the interviews and return it to the school at your earliest convenience.

Please note that this project has been granted full ethical approval by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University. If you have any queries or questions in relation to this letter then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanking you in advance,

Yours sincerely,

_____

Caoimhe McCarthy, Trainee Educational Psychologist

Information Leaflet

With your consent, it is hoped that your child will participate in two interviews. These interviews will take about 30 minutes each and are scheduled to take place in April and September of this year.

The interviews will take place in a room in the school and will be tape-recorded to ensure that none of the children's opinions are missed. As a trainee educational psychologist, I have ample experience working with children and young people in a positive way.

The aim of the interview is to examine the function and development of the child's relationship with their imaginary companion. The discussion will explore details of their imaginary friend(s) such as physical and personality characteristics, activities that the child engages in with their imaginary friend, what they like most about having an imaginary companion etc. There will also be time for your child to be able to ask any of their own questions.

All interviews are confidential and remain nameless and the information gained will not identify your child in any way.

The interviews will only take place with both your and your child's permission. Consent can be withdrawn at anytime. Should consent be withdrawn, all data collected in relation to your child will be destroyed.

If at any point you want to contact someone other than myself in relation to this research, please do not hesitate to contact my supervisor, Dr. Harry Rafferty.

Consent Form

Name of Child: _____

I give consent for my child to take part in the interviews

I do not give my consent for my child to take part in the interviews

Signed _____

(print) _____

Appendix 4: Interview Schedules

Interview 1

Hello X. Thank you for coming up here to have a chat with me. My name is Caoimhe and I have come to your school today to talk to some children about their imaginary friends and what it is like to have one. If you remember, I visited your school a few weeks ago and asked all the P3 children if they have an imaginary friend and you kindly filled in this sheet for me (show child the questionnaire).

On the sheet, you said that you had an imaginary friend, is that right?

You also said that you would be happy to talk to me about your imaginary friend. Are you still happy to do that?

I am going to ask you some questions and what we say will be recorded in this voice recorder (show dictaphone) because I don't want to forget any of the important things you say. Is that ok?

If I ask a question that you really don't want to answer then we can leave that one out. And if you want to stop talking and go back to your class, then just let me know and we can stop. Does that sound ok?

Don't worry about saying the wrong thing because there are no right or wrong answers. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

1. What does your IF look like? Could you describe them for me?

2. Can you remember when you first met your IF?

3. If you want to see your IF, or play with them, how do you find them?

4. How do you feel about your IF?

5. Is there anything you don't like about your IF?

6. What kinds of things does your IF do?

7. Is there anything that you and your IF do together?

8. Have you talked to anyone else about your IF?

9. Why do you think some people might have an IF?

10. Why do think other people don't have an IF?
11. How would you explain to someone who doesn't have an IF what it is like to have one?
12. Does your IF have a name?
13. Thank you very much for telling mw about X. I have some markers and some colouring pencils here, will you draw me a picture of X.

Thank you so much for coming to talk to me. I loved hearing about you and X. Are there any questions you wold like to ask me? If you think of any questions that you want to ask later, then it would be a good idea to ask your teacher.

Interview 2

Hello X. Thank you for coming to have a chat with me today. My name is Caoimhe and, if you remember, I came to your school a few months ago when you were in P3 to have a chat with you about your imaginary friend. Do you remember that?

On that day you told me all about your friend and what you do together. Today, I would like to talk to you again and ask you a little bit more about your friend - are you happy to talk to me again, just like last time?

I am going to ask you some questions and what we say will be recorded on this voice recorder (show dictaphone) because I don't want to forget any of the important things you say. Is that ok?

If I ask you a question that you really don't want to answer then we can leave that one out. And if you want to stop talking and go back to your class then just let me know and we can stop. Does that sound ok?

Don't worry about saying the wrong thing because there are no right or wrong answers. And don't worry if some of the questions sound the same as the last time we spoke.

Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Screener

1. Do you have an imaginary friend?
2. What does your IF look like? Could you describe them for me? What is their name?

If they have the **same imaginary friend**:

3. How do you feel about your IF?
4. What do you like about your IF?
5. Is there anything you don't like about your IF?
6. When was the last time you saw your IF?
7. What kinds of things does your IF do?
8. Is there anything you and your IF do together?
9. Does anyone else know about your IF?
10. Do you think adults have IF's? Why/Why not?
11. How would you feel if you didn't have an IF?
12. Drawing of IF

If they have a **replacement imaginary friend**:

3. When was the last time you saw yourX (use name) (who you told me about last time)
4. Did you want X to go away? Why/Why not?
5. Why do you think that X went away?
6. How did you feel when X1 went away?
7. How do you feel about Y?
8. What do you like about Y?
9. Is there anything you don't like about Y?
10. What kinds of things does Y do?
11. Is there anything you and Y do together?
12. Does anyone else know about Y?
13. Do you think adults have IF's? Why/Why not?
11. How would you feel if you didn't have an IF?
12. Drawing of Y

If they have **no imaginary friend**:

3. When was the last time you saw X?
4. Did you want X to go away? Why/Why not?
5. Why do you think that X went away?
6. How did you feel when X went away?
7. Do you think adults have IF's? Why/Why not?

Appendix 5: Letter of Ethical Approval

Queen's University Belfast

School of Psychology
Queen's University Belfast
David Keir Building
18-30 Malone Road
BELFAST BT9 5BP
Tel: 028 90975518
Fax: 028 90975486
psychology@qub.ac.uk
www.psych.qub.ac.uk

01 March 2013

Dr Harry Rafferty
School of Psychology

Dear Dr Rafferty

Full title of Study: The purpose, function and development of imaginary friendship.
PREC reference number: No 31-2013

Thank you for your response to our request for further information regarding the above mentioned research application.

I can confirm that ethical approval has been granted for your project by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University Belfast.

Please note that the Participant Information sheet should include an appended statement confirming ethical approval.

It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that the research has been recorded on the University's Human Subjects Research Database otherwise it will not be covered by the University's indemnity insurance. This database can be found in the 'My Research' section of Queen's On-line.

Yours sincerely

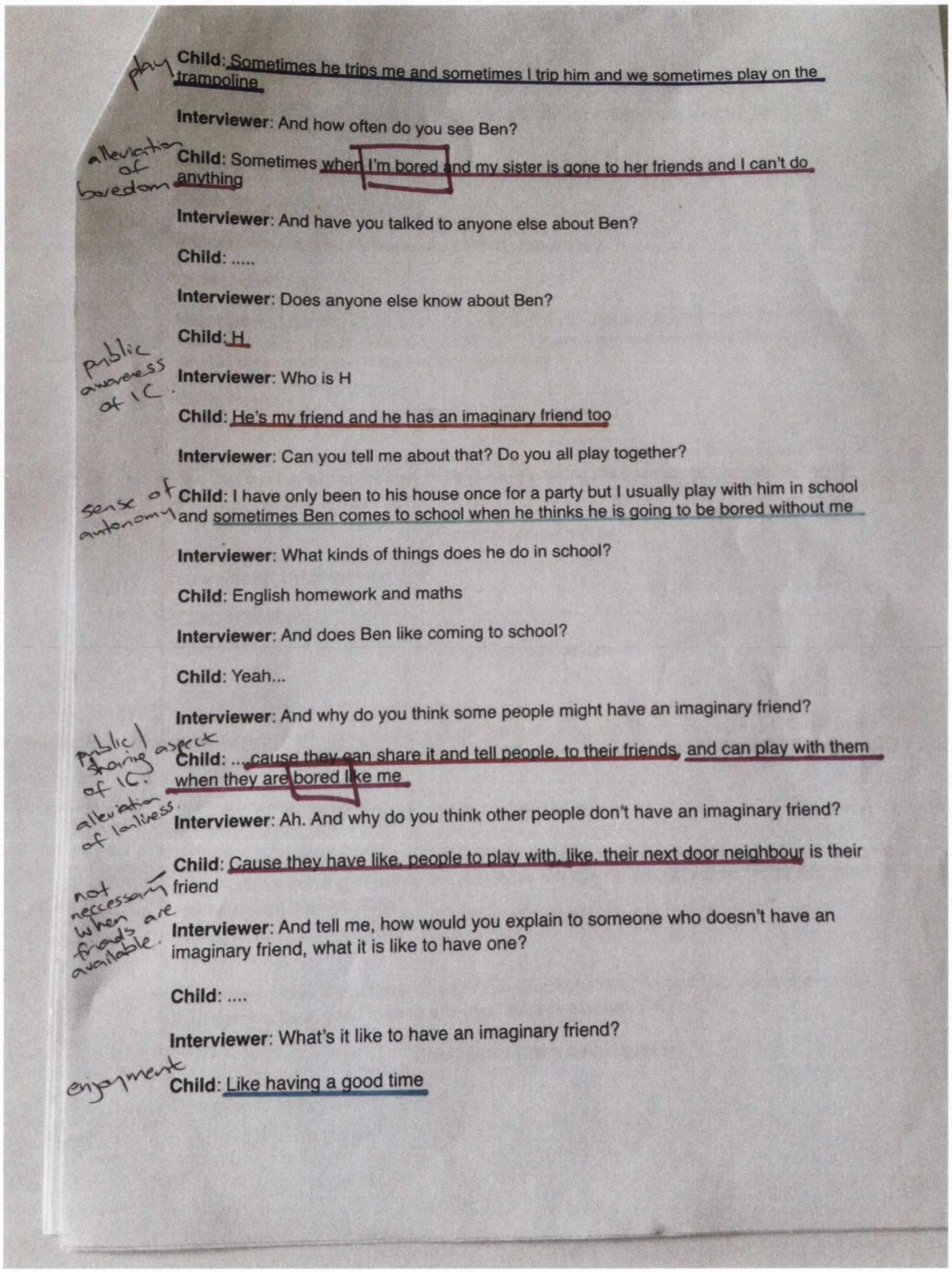
PP

Dr Ian Sneddon (Chair)
Psychology Research Ethics Committee

cc Ms Caoimhe McCarthy

Appendix 6: Selection of Interview Extracts & Coding

Child 1: Interview 1



play

Child: Sometimes he trips me and sometimes I trip him and we sometimes play on the trampoline

Interviewer: And how often do you see Ben?

alleviation of boredom

Child: Sometimes when I'm bored and my sister is gone to her friends and I can't do anything

Interviewer: And have you talked to anyone else about Ben?

Child: .....

Interviewer: Does anyone else know about Ben?

Child: H

public awareness of IC

Interviewer: Who is H

Child: He's my friend and he has an imaginary friend too

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that? Do you all play together?

sense of autonomy

Child: I have only been to his house once for a party but I usually play with him in school and sometimes Ben comes to school when he thinks he is going to be bored without me

Interviewer: What kinds of things does he do in school?

Child: English homework and maths

Interviewer: And does Ben like coming to school?

Child: Yeah...

Interviewer: And why do you think some people might have an imaginary friend?

public/sharing aspect of IC

alleviation of laniness

Child: ...cause they can share it and tell people, to their friends, and can play with them when they are bored like me

Interviewer: Ah. And why do you think other people don't have an imaginary friend?

not necessary when friends are available

Child: Cause they have like, people to play with, like, their next door neighbour is their friend

Interviewer: And tell me, how would you explain to someone who doesn't have an imaginary friend, what it is like to have one?

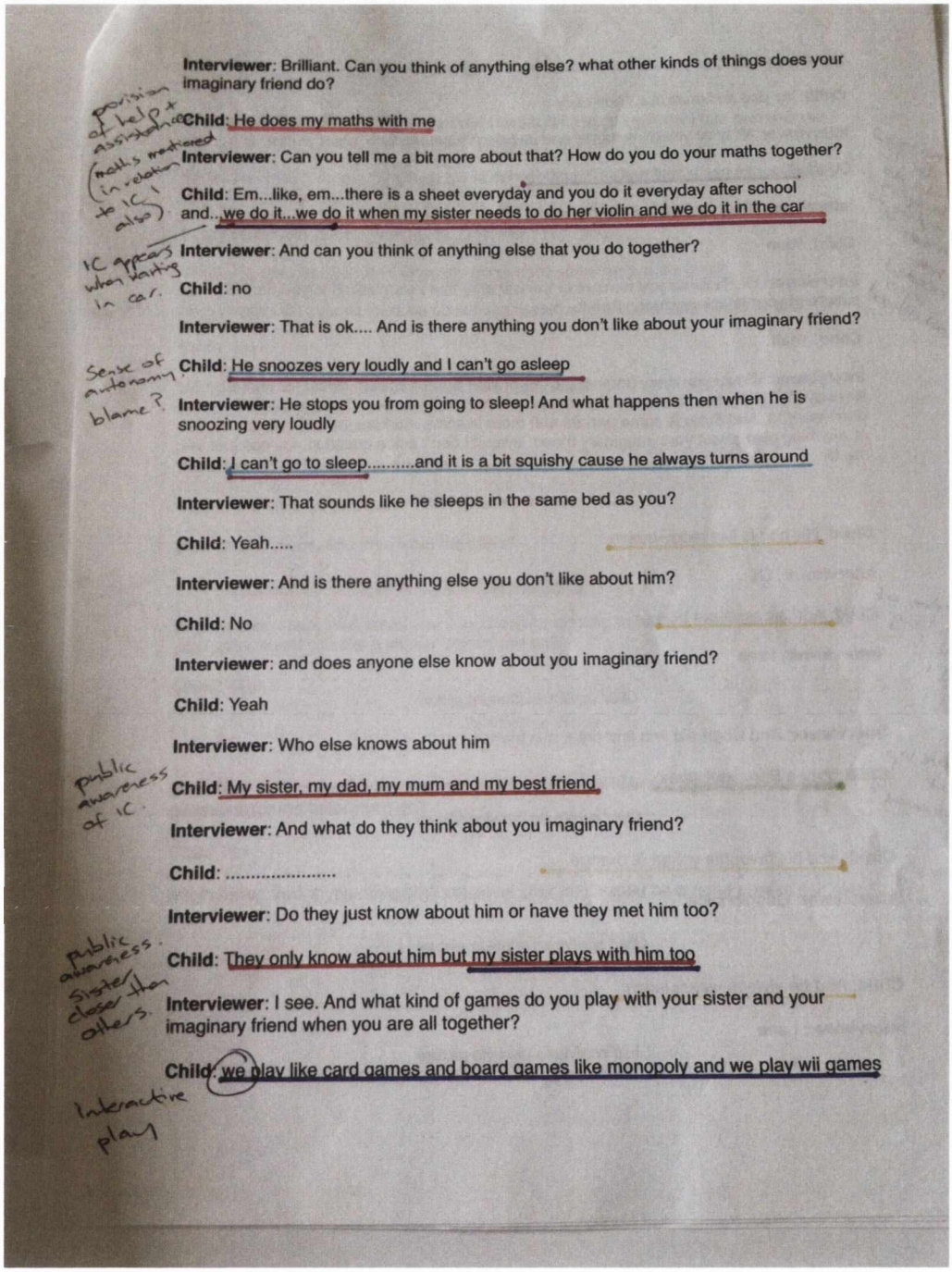
Child: ....

Interviewer: What's it like to have an imaginary friend?

enjoyment

Child: Like having a good time

Child 1: Interview 2



Interviewer: Brilliant. Can you think of anything else? what other kinds of things does your imaginary friend do?

Child: He does my maths with me

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about that? How do you do your maths together?

Child: Em...like, em...there is a sheet everyday and you do it everyday after school and...we do it...we do it when my sister needs to do her violin and we do it in the car

Interviewer: And can you think of anything else that you do together?

Child: no

Interviewer: That is ok.... And is there anything you don't like about your imaginary friend?

Child: He snoozes very loudly and I can't go asleep

Interviewer: He stops you from going to sleep! And what happens then when he is snoozing very loudly

Child: I can't go to sleep.....and it is a bit squishy cause he always turns around

Interviewer: That sounds like he sleeps in the same bed as you?

Child: Yeah.....

Interviewer: And is there anything else you don't like about him?

Child: No

Interviewer: and does anyone else know about you imaginary friend?

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: Who else knows about him

Child: My sister, my dad, my mum and my best friend

Interviewer: And what do they think about you imaginary friend?

Child: .....

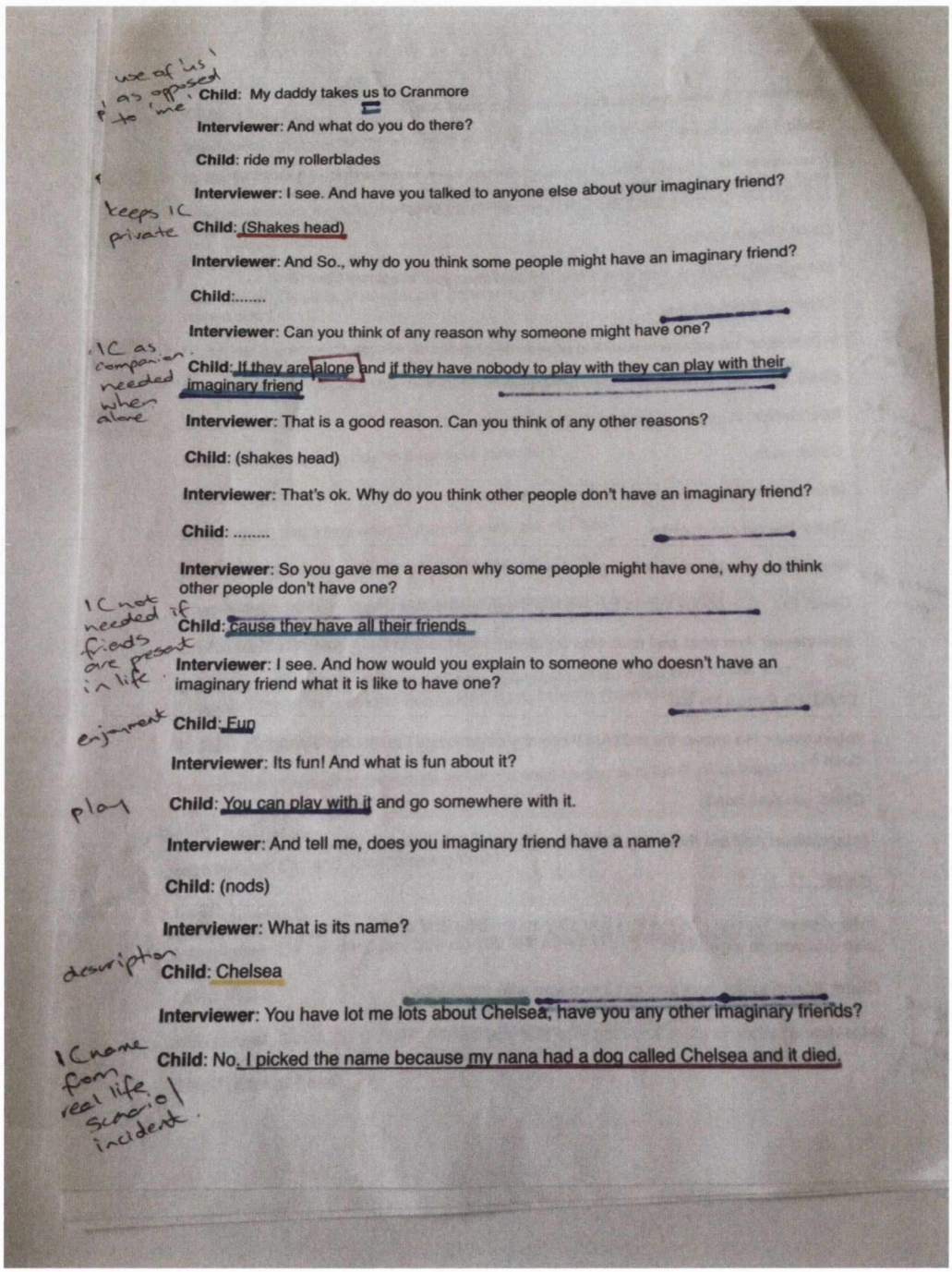
Interviewer: Do they just know about him or have they met him too?

Child: They only know about him but my sister plays with him too

Interviewer: I see. And what kind of games do you play with your sister and your imaginary friend when you are all together?

Child: we play like card games and board games like monopoly and we play wii games

Child 2: Interview 1



use of 'us' as opposed to 'me'

Child: My daddy takes us to Cranmore

Interviewer: And what do you do there?

Child: ride my rollerblades

Interviewer: I see. And have you talked to anyone else about your imaginary friend?

keeps IC private

Child: (Shakes head)

Interviewer: And So., why do you think some people might have an imaginary friend?

Child:.....

Interviewer: Can you think of any reason why someone might have one?

IC as companion needed when alone

Child: If they are alone and if they have nobody to play with they can play with their imaginary friend

Interviewer: That is a good reason. Can you think of any other reasons?

Child: (shakes head)

Interviewer: That's ok. Why do you think other people don't have an imaginary friend?

Child: .....

Interviewer: So you gave me a reason why some people might have one, why do think other people don't have one?

IC not needed if friends are present in life.

Child: cause they have all their friends

Interviewer: I see. And how would you explain to someone who doesn't have an imaginary friend what it is like to have one?

enjoyment

Child: Fun

Interviewer: Its fun! And what is fun about it?

play

Child: You can play with it and go somewhere with it.

Interviewer: And tell me, does you imaginary friend have a name?

Child: (nods)

Interviewer: What is its name?

description

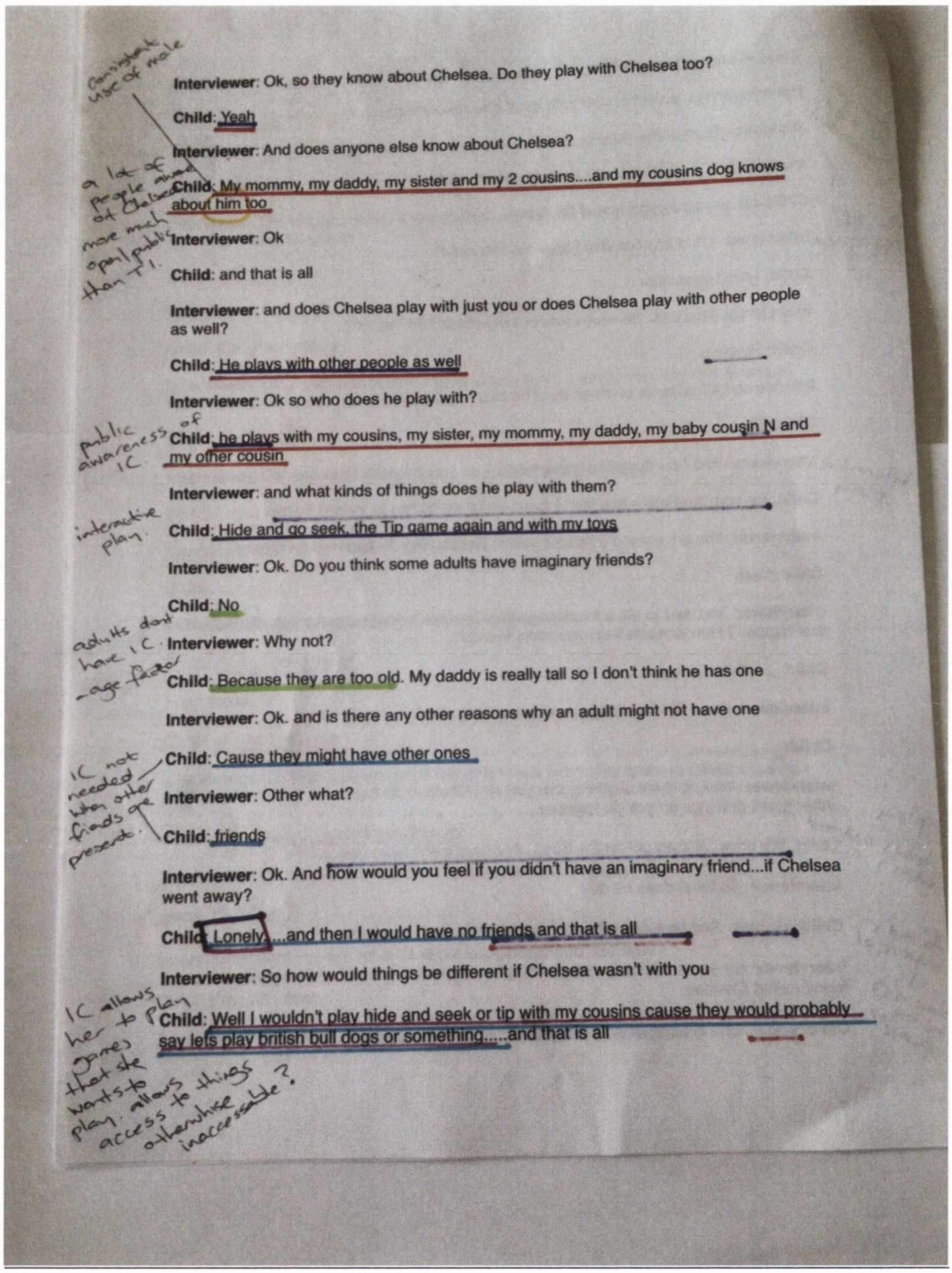
Child: Chelsea

Interviewer: You have lot me lots about Chelsea, have you any other imaginary friends?

IC name from real life scenario/ incident.

Child: No, I picked the name because my nana had a dog called Chelsea and it died.

Child 2: Interview 2



Interviewer: Ok, so they know about Chelsea. Do they play with Chelsea too?

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: And does anyone else know about Chelsea?

Child: My mommy, my daddy, my sister and my 2 cousins....and my cousins dog knows about him too

Interviewer: Ok

Child: and that is all

Interviewer: and does Chelsea play with just you or does Chelsea play with other people as well?

Child: He plays with other people as well

Interviewer: Ok so who does he play with?

Child: he plays with my cousins, my sister, my mommy, my daddy, my baby cousin N and my other cousin

Interviewer: and what kinds of things does he play with them?

Child: Hide and go seek, the Tip game again and with my toys

Interviewer: Ok. Do you think some adults have imaginary friends?

Child: No

Interviewer: Why not?

Child: Because they are too old. My daddy is really tall so I don't think he has one

Interviewer: Ok. and is there any other reasons why an adult might not have one

Child: Cause they might have other ones

Interviewer: Other what?

Child: friends

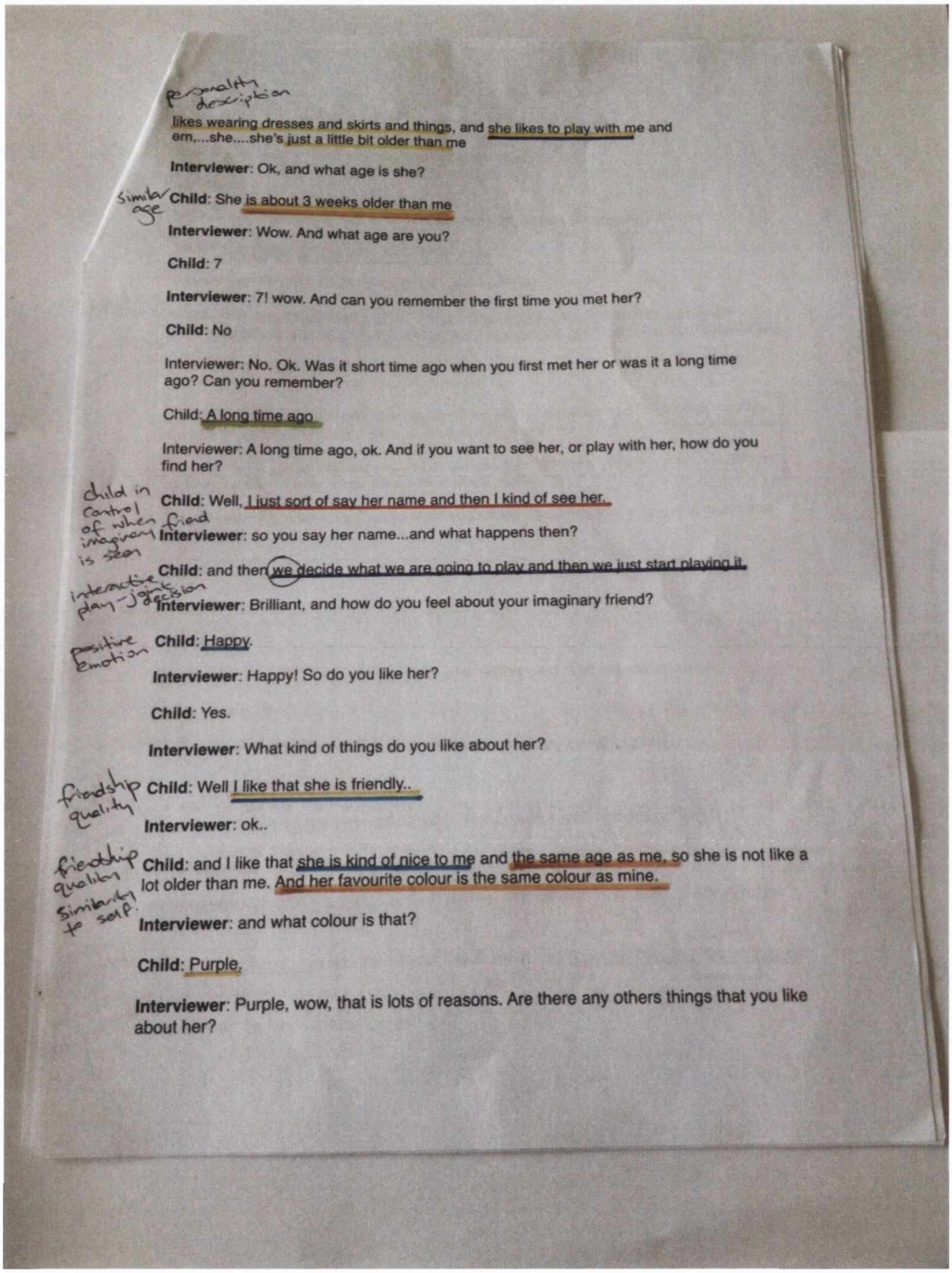
Interviewer: Ok. And how would you feel if you didn't have an imaginary friend...if Chelsea went away?

Child: Lonely....and then I would have no friends and that is all

Interviewer: So how would things be different if Chelsea wasn't with you

Child: Well I wouldn't play hide and seek or tip with my cousins cause they would probably say lets play british bull dogs or something.....and that is all

Child 3: Interview 1



personality description

likes wearing dresses and skirts and things, and she likes to play with me and erm,...she....she's just a little bit older than me

Interviewer: Ok, and what age is she?

similar age **Child**: She is about 3 weeks older than me

Interviewer: Wow. And what age are you?

Child: 7

Interviewer: 7! wow. And can you remember the first time you met her?

Child: No

Interviewer: No. Ok. Was it short time ago when you first met her or was it a long time ago? Can you remember?

Child: A long time ago

Interviewer: A long time ago, ok. And if you want to see her, or play with her, how do you find her?

child in control of when imaginary friend is seen **Child**: Well, I just sort of say her name and then I kind of see her.

Interviewer: so you say her name...and what happens then?

interactive play - joint decision **Child**: and then we decide what we are going to play and then we just start playing it.

Interviewer: Brilliant, and how do you feel about your imaginary friend?

positive emotion **Child**: Happy.

Interviewer: Happy! So do you like her?

Child: Yes.

Interviewer: What kind of things do you like about her?

friendship quality **Child**: Well I like that she is friendly..

Interviewer: ok..

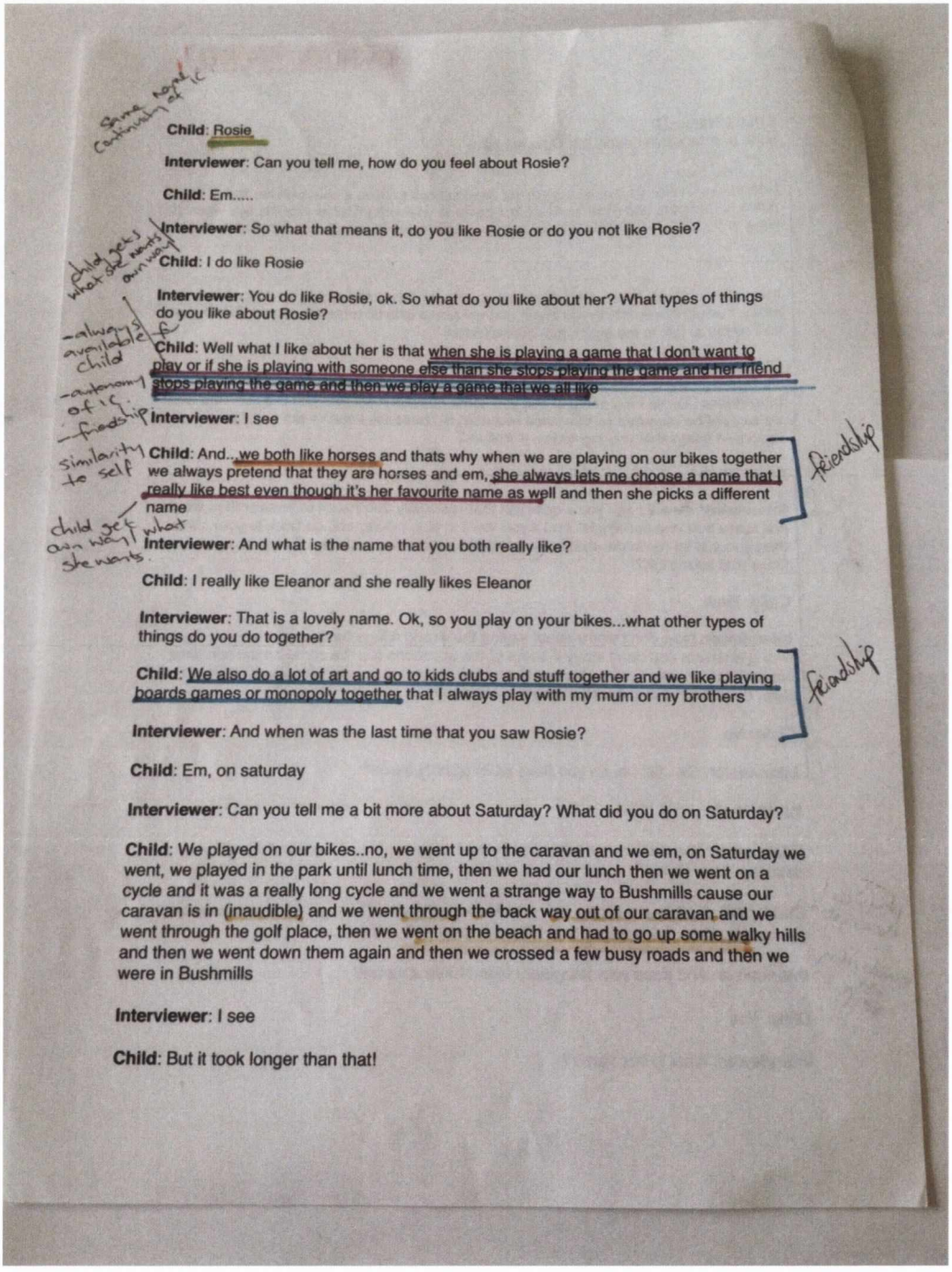
friendship quality similarity to self **Child**: and I like that she is kind of nice to me and the same age as me, so she is not like a lot older than me. And her favourite colour is the same colour as mine.

Interviewer: and what colour is that?

Child: Purple.

Interviewer: Purple, wow, that is lots of reasons. Are there any others things that you like about her?

Child 3: Interview 2



Child: Rosie

Interviewer: Can you tell me, how do you feel about Rosie?

Child: Em.....

Interviewer: So what that means it, do you like Rosie or do you not like Rosie?

Child: I do like Rosie

Interviewer: You do like Rosie, ok. So what do you like about her? What types of things do you like about Rosie?

Child: Well what I like about her is that when she is playing a game that I don't want to play or if she is playing with someone else than she stops playing the game and her friend stops playing the game and then we play a game that we all like

Interviewer: I see

Child: And...we both like horses and thats why when we are playing on our bikes together we always pretend that they are horses and em, she always lets me choose a name that I really like best even though it's her favourite name as well and then she picks a different name

Interviewer: And what is the name that you both really like?

Child: I really like Eleanor and she really likes Eleanor

Interviewer: That is a lovely name. Ok, so you play on your bikes...what other types of things do you do together?

Child: We also do a lot of art and go to kids clubs and stuff together and we like playing boards games or monopoly together that I always play with my mum or my brothers

Interviewer: And when was the last time that you saw Rosie?

Child: Em, on saturday

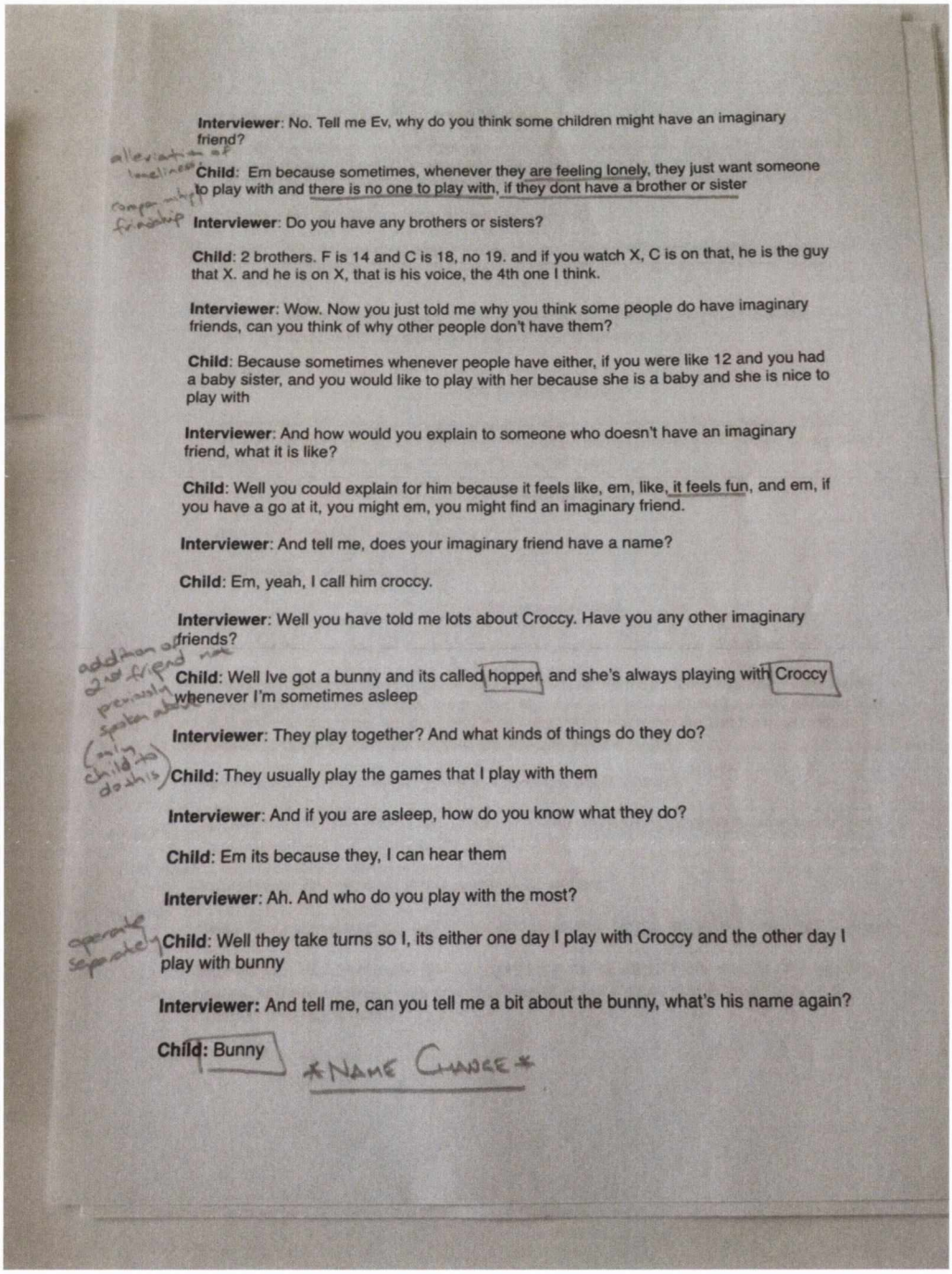
Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about Saturday? What did you do on Saturday?

Child: We played on our bikes..no, we went up to the caravan and we em, on Saturday we went, we played in the park until lunch time, then we had our lunch then we went on a cycle and it was a really long cycle and we went a strange way to Bushmills cause our caravan is in (inaudible) and we went through the back way out of our caravan and we went through the golf place, then we went on the beach and had to go up some walky hills and then we went down them again and then we crossed a few busy roads and then we were in Bushmills

Interviewer: I see

Child: But it took longer than that!

Child 4: Interview 1



Interviewer: No. Tell me Ev, why do you think some children might have an imaginary friend?

Child: Em because sometimes, whenever they are feeling lonely, they just want someone to play with and there is no one to play with, if they dont have a brother or sister

Interviewer: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Child: 2 brothers. F is 14 and C is 18, no 19. and if you watch X, C is on that, he is the guy that X. and he is on X, that is his voice, the 4th one I think.

Interviewer: Wow. Now you just told me why you think some people do have imaginary friends, can you think of why other people don't have them?

Child: Because sometimes whenever people have either, if you were like 12 and you had a baby sister, and you would like to play with her because she is a baby and she is nice to play with

Interviewer: And how would you explain to someone who doesn't have an imaginary friend, what it is like?

Child: Well you could explain for him because it feels like, em, like, it feels fun, and em, if you have a go at it, you might em, you might find an imaginary friend.

Interviewer: And tell me, does your imaginary friend have a name?

Child: Em, yeah, I call him croccy.

Interviewer: Well you have told me lots about Croccy. Have you any other imaginary friends?

Child: Well Ive got a bunny and its called hopper, and she's always playing with Croccy whenever I'm sometimes asleep

Interviewer: They play together? And what kinds of things do they do?

Child: They usually play the games that I play with them

Interviewer: And if you are asleep, how do you know what they do?

Child: Em its because they, I can hear them

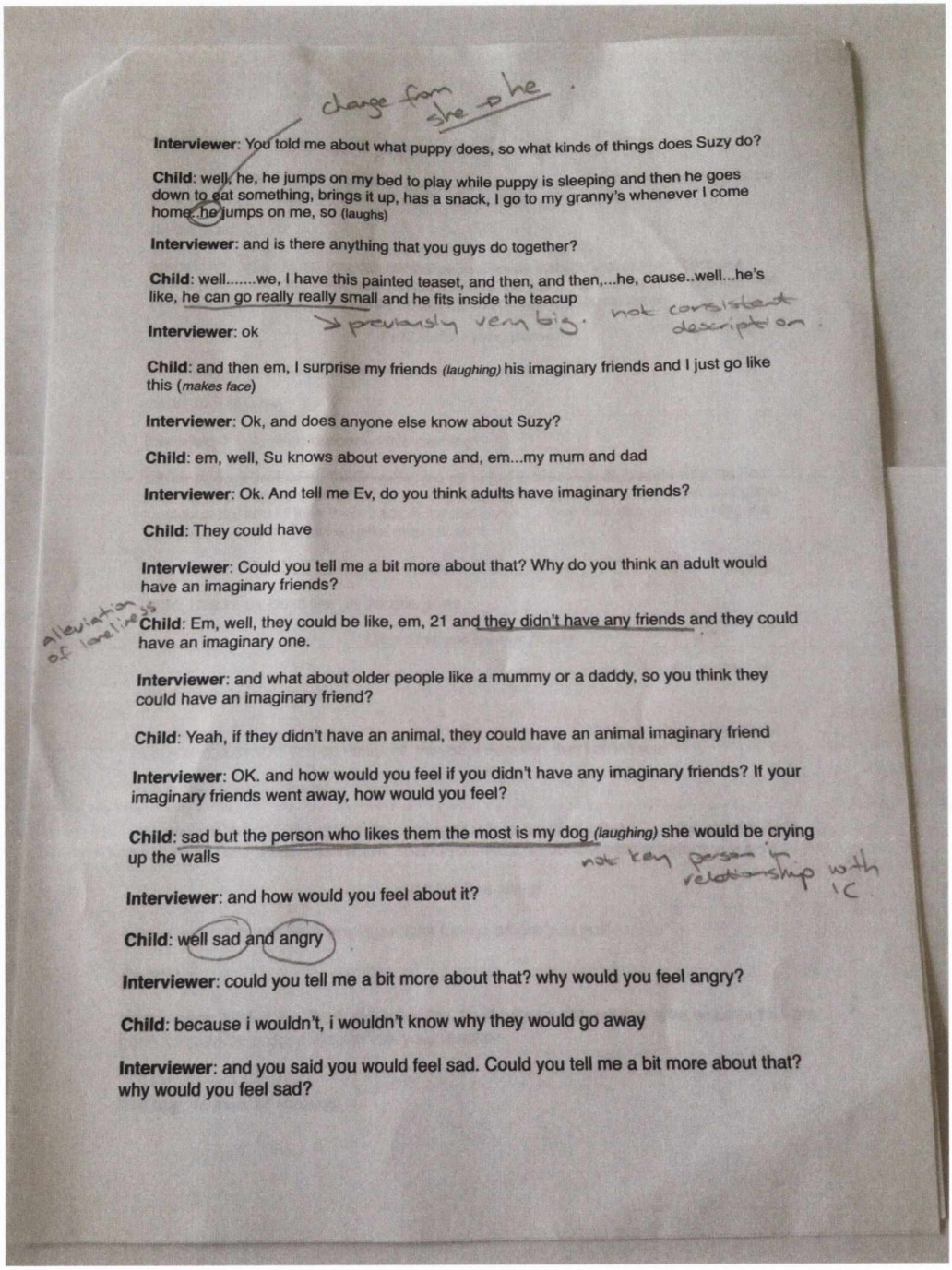
Interviewer: Ah. And who do you play with the most?

Child: Well they take turns so I, its either one day I play with Croccy and the other day I play with bunny

Interviewer: And tell me, can you tell me a bit about the bunny, what's his name again?

Child: Bunny *NAME CHANGE*

Child 4: Interview 2



change from she → he

Interviewer: You told me about what puppy does, so what kinds of things does Suzy do?

Child: well, he, he jumps on my bed to play while puppy is sleeping and then he goes down to eat something, brings it up, has a snack, I go to my granny's whenever I come home..he jumps on me, so (laughs)

Interviewer: and is there anything that you guys do together?

Child: well.....we, I have this painted teaset, and then, and then,...he, cause..well...he's like, he can go really really small and he fits inside the teacup

→ previously very big. not consistent description.

Interviewer: ok

Child: and then em, I surprise my friends *(laughing)* his imaginary friends and I just go like this (*makes face*)

Interviewer: Ok, and does anyone else know about Suzy?

Child: em, well, Su knows about everyone and, em...my mum and dad

Interviewer: Ok. And tell me Ev, do you think adults have imaginary friends?

Child: They could have

Interviewer: Could you tell me a bit more about that? Why do you think an adult would have an imaginary friends?

alleviation of loneliness

Child: Em, well, they could be like, em, 21 and they didn't have any friends and they could have an imaginary one.

Interviewer: and what about older people like a mummy or a daddy, so you think they could have an imaginary friend?

Child: Yeah, if they didn't have an animal, they could have an animal imaginary friend

Interviewer: OK. and how would you feel if you didn't have any imaginary friends? If your imaginary friends went away, how would you feel?

Child: sad but the person who likes them the most is my dog *(laughing)* she would be crying up the walls

not key person in relationship with IC

Interviewer: and how would you feel about it?

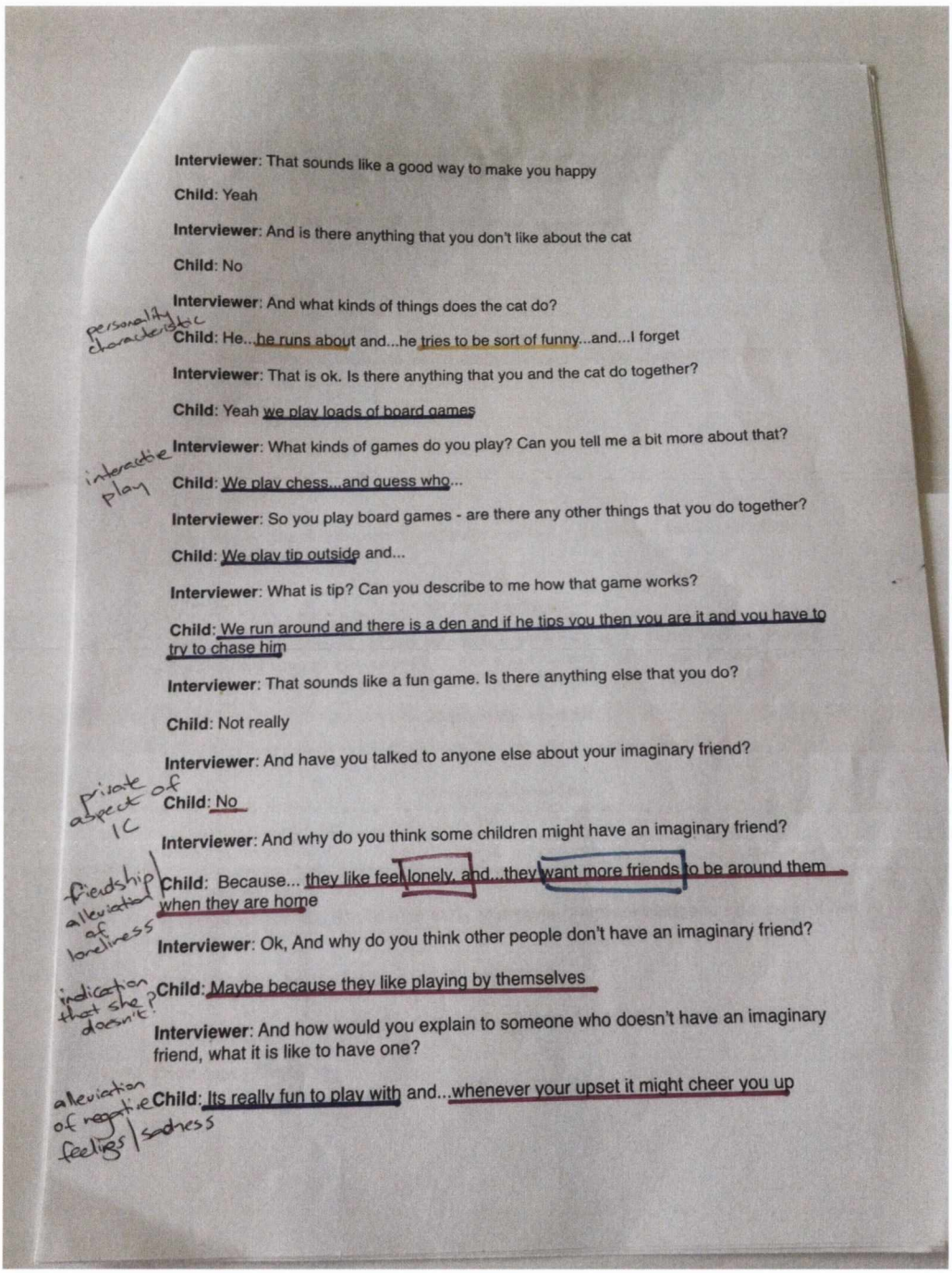
Child: well sad and angry

Interviewer: could you tell me a bit more about that? why would you feel angry?

Child: because i wouldn't, i wouldn't know why they would go away

Interviewer: and you said you would feel sad. Could you tell me a bit more about that? why would you feel sad?

Child 5: Interview 1



Interviewer: That sounds like a good way to make you happy

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: And is there anything that you don't like about the cat

Child: No

personality characteristic

Interviewer: And what kinds of things does the cat do?

Child: He...he runs about and...he tries to be sort of funny...and...I forget

Interviewer: That is ok. Is there anything that you and the cat do together?

Child: Yeah we play loads of board games

interactive play

Interviewer: What kinds of games do you play? Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Child: We play chess...and guess who...

Interviewer: So you play board games - are there any other things that you do together?

Child: We play tip outside and...

Interviewer: What is tip? Can you describe to me how that game works?

Child: We run around and there is a den and if he tips you then you are it and you have to try to chase him

Interviewer: That sounds like a fun game. Is there anything else that you do?

Child: Not really

Interviewer: And have you talked to anyone else about your imaginary friend?

private aspect of IC

Child: No

Interviewer: And why do you think some children might have an imaginary friend?

friendship alleviation of loneliness

Child: Because... they like feel lonely, and...they want more friends to be around them when they are home

Interviewer: Ok, And why do you think other people don't have an imaginary friend?

indication that she doesn't?

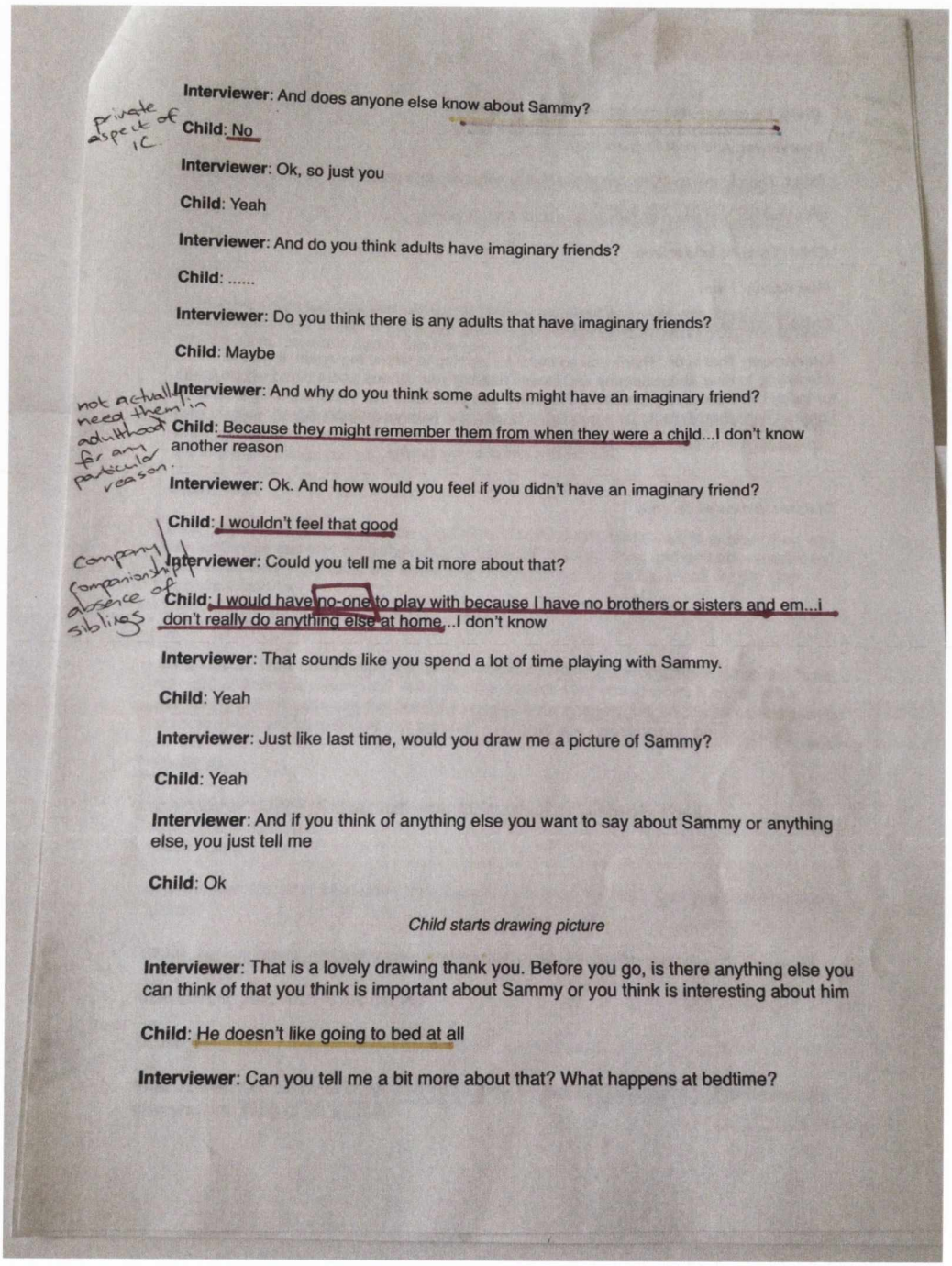
Child: Maybe because they like playing by themselves

Interviewer: And how would you explain to someone who doesn't have an imaginary friend, what it is like to have one?

alleviation of negative feelings / sadness

Child: Its really fun to play with and...whenever your upset it might cheer you up

Child 5: Interview 2



Interviewer: And does anyone else know about Sammy?

Child: No

Interviewer: Ok, so just you

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: And do you think adults have imaginary friends?

Child: .....

Interviewer: Do you think there is any adults that have imaginary friends?

Child: Maybe

Interviewer: And why do you think some adults might have an imaginary friend?

Child: Because they might remember them from when they were a child...I don't know another reason

Interviewer: Ok. And how would you feel if you didn't have an imaginary friend?

Child: I wouldn't feel that good

Interviewer: Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Child: I would have no-one to play with because I have no brothers or sisters and em...i don't really do anything else at home...I don't know

Interviewer: That sounds like you spend a lot of time playing with Sammy.

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: Just like last time, would you draw me a picture of Sammy?

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: And if you think of anything else you want to say about Sammy or anything else, you just tell me

Child: Ok

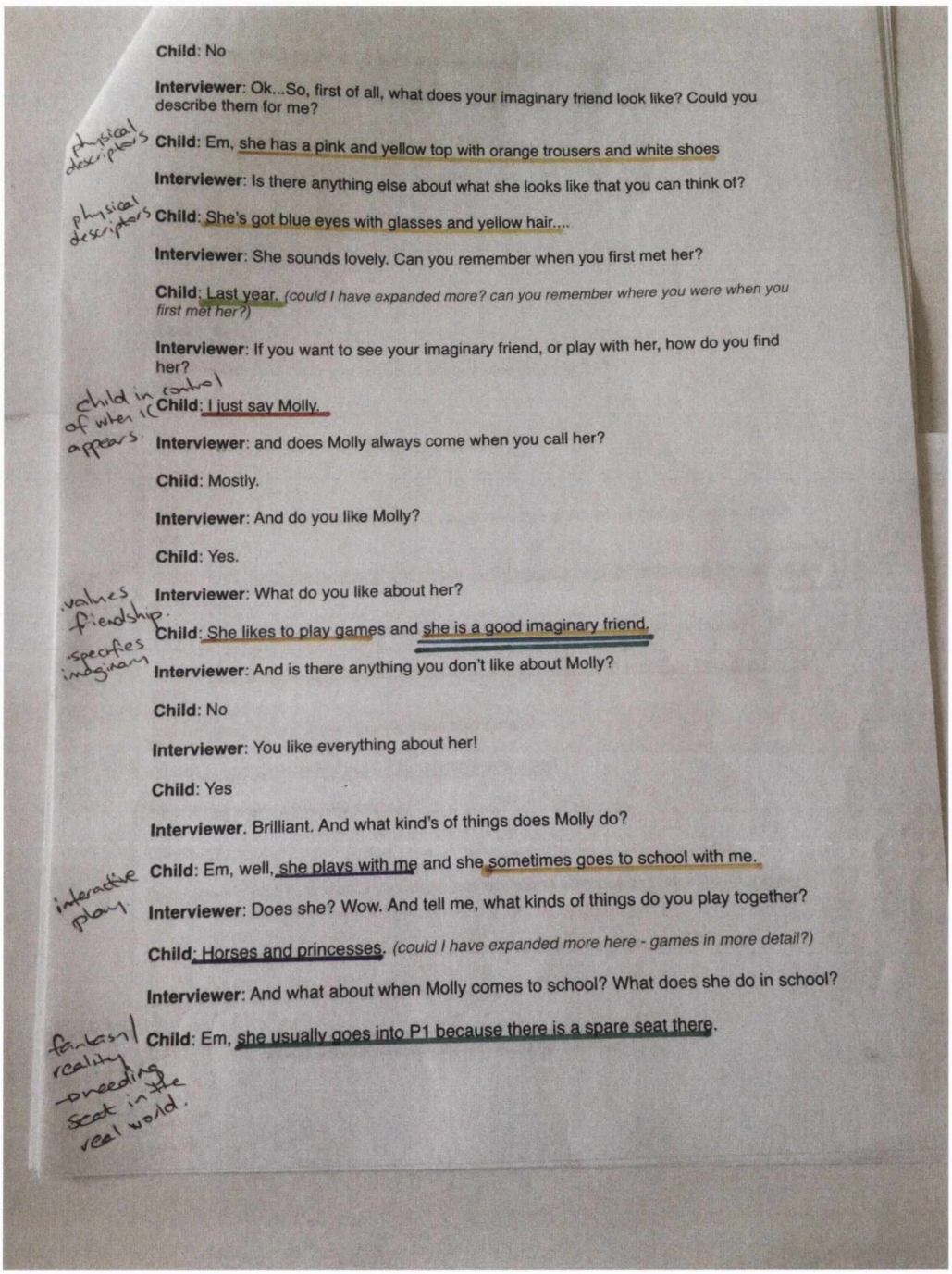
Child starts drawing picture

Interviewer: That is a lovely drawing thank you. Before you go, is there anything else you can think of that you think is important about Sammy or you think is interesting about him

Child: He doesn't like going to bed at all

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about that? What happens at bedtime?

Child 6: Interview 1



Child: No

Interviewer: Ok...So, first of all, what does your imaginary friend look like? Could you describe them for me?

physical descriptors

Child: Em, she has a pink and yellow top with orange trousers and white shoes

Interviewer: Is there anything else about what she looks like that you can think of?

physical descriptors

Child: She's got blue eyes with glasses and yellow hair....

Interviewer: She sounds lovely. Can you remember when you first met her?

Child: Last year. *(could I have expanded more? can you remember where you were when you first met her?)*

Interviewer: If you want to see your imaginary friend, or play with her, how do you find her?

child in control of when IC appears.

Child: I just say Molly.

Interviewer: and does Molly always come when you call her?

Child: Mostly.

Interviewer: And do you like Molly?

Child: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you like about her?

values friendship. specifies imaginary

Child: She likes to play games and she is a good imaginary friend.

Interviewer: And is there anything you don't like about Molly?

Child: No

Interviewer: You like everything about her!

Child: Yes

Interviewer. Brilliant. And what kind's of things does Molly do?

interactive play

Child: Em, well, she plays with me and she sometimes goes to school with me.

Interviewer: Does she? Wow. And tell me, what kinds of things do you play together?

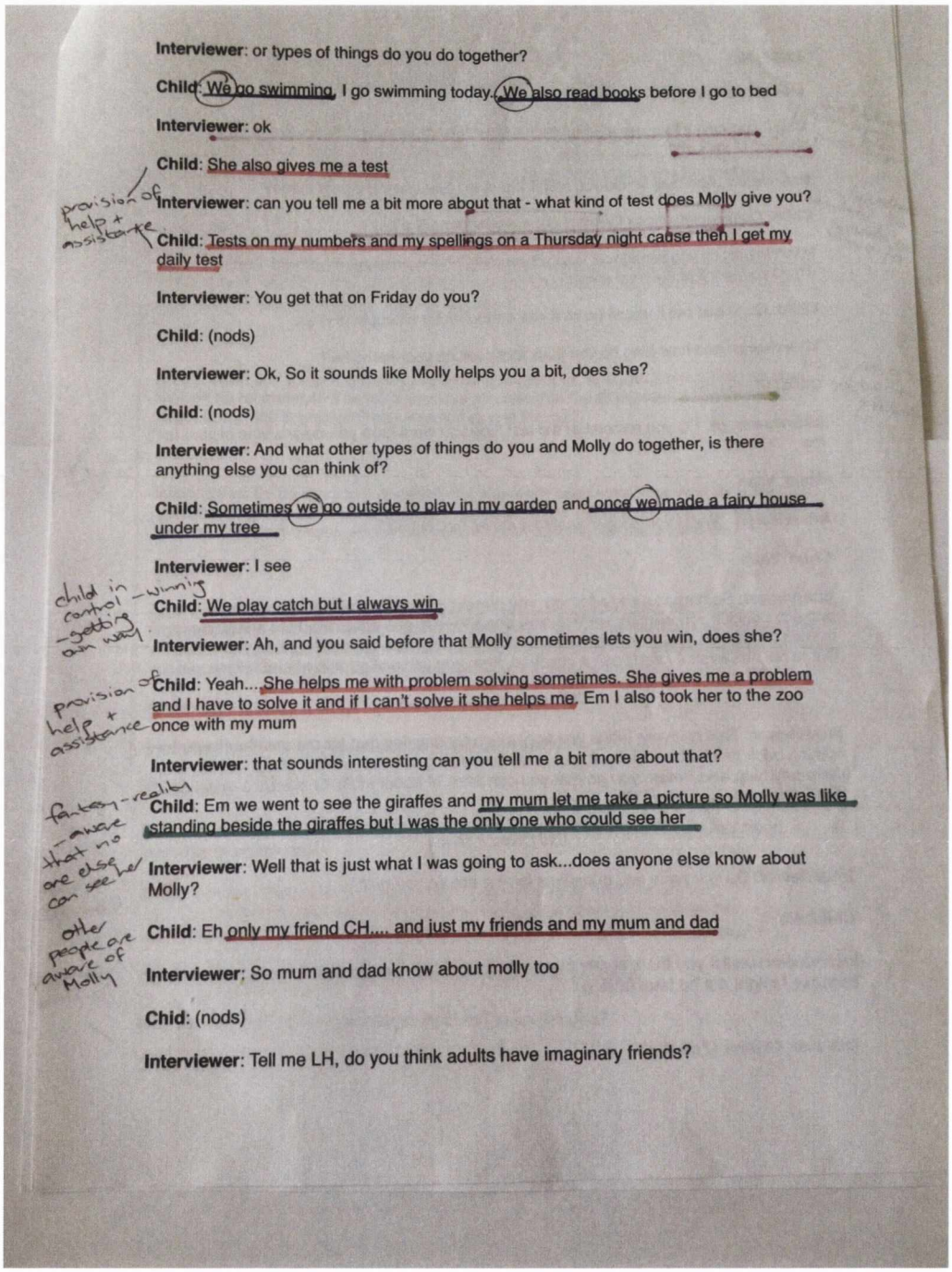
Child: Horses and princesses. *(could I have expanded more here - games in more detail?)*

Interviewer: And what about when Molly comes to school? What does she do in school?

fantasy/ reality - sneaking seat in the real world.

Child: Em, she usually goes into P1 because there is a spare seat there.

Child 6: Interview 2



Interviewer: or types of things do you do together?

Child: We go swimming, I go swimming today. We also read books before I go to bed

Interviewer: ok

Child: She also gives me a test

provision of help + assistance

Interviewer: can you tell me a bit more about that - what kind of test does Molly give you?

Child: Tests on my numbers and my spellings on a Thursday night cause then I get my daily test

Interviewer: You get that on Friday do you?

Child: (nods)

Interviewer: Ok, So it sounds like Molly helps you a bit, does she?

Child: (nods)

Interviewer: And what other types of things do you and Molly do together, is there anything else you can think of?

Child: Sometimes we go outside to play in my garden and once we made a fairy house under my tree

Interviewer: I see

child in control - winning - getting own way

Child: We play catch but I always win

Interviewer: Ah, and you said before that Molly sometimes lets you win, does she?

provision of help + assistance

Child: Yeah... She helps me with problem solving sometimes. She gives me a problem and I have to solve it and if I can't solve it she helps me. Em I also took her to the zoo once with my mum

Interviewer: that sounds interesting can you tell me a bit more about that?

fantasy - reality - aware that no one else can see her

Child: Em we went to see the giraffes and my mum let me take a picture so Molly was like standing beside the giraffes but I was the only one who could see her

Interviewer: Well that is just what I was going to ask...does anyone else know about Molly?

other people are aware of Molly

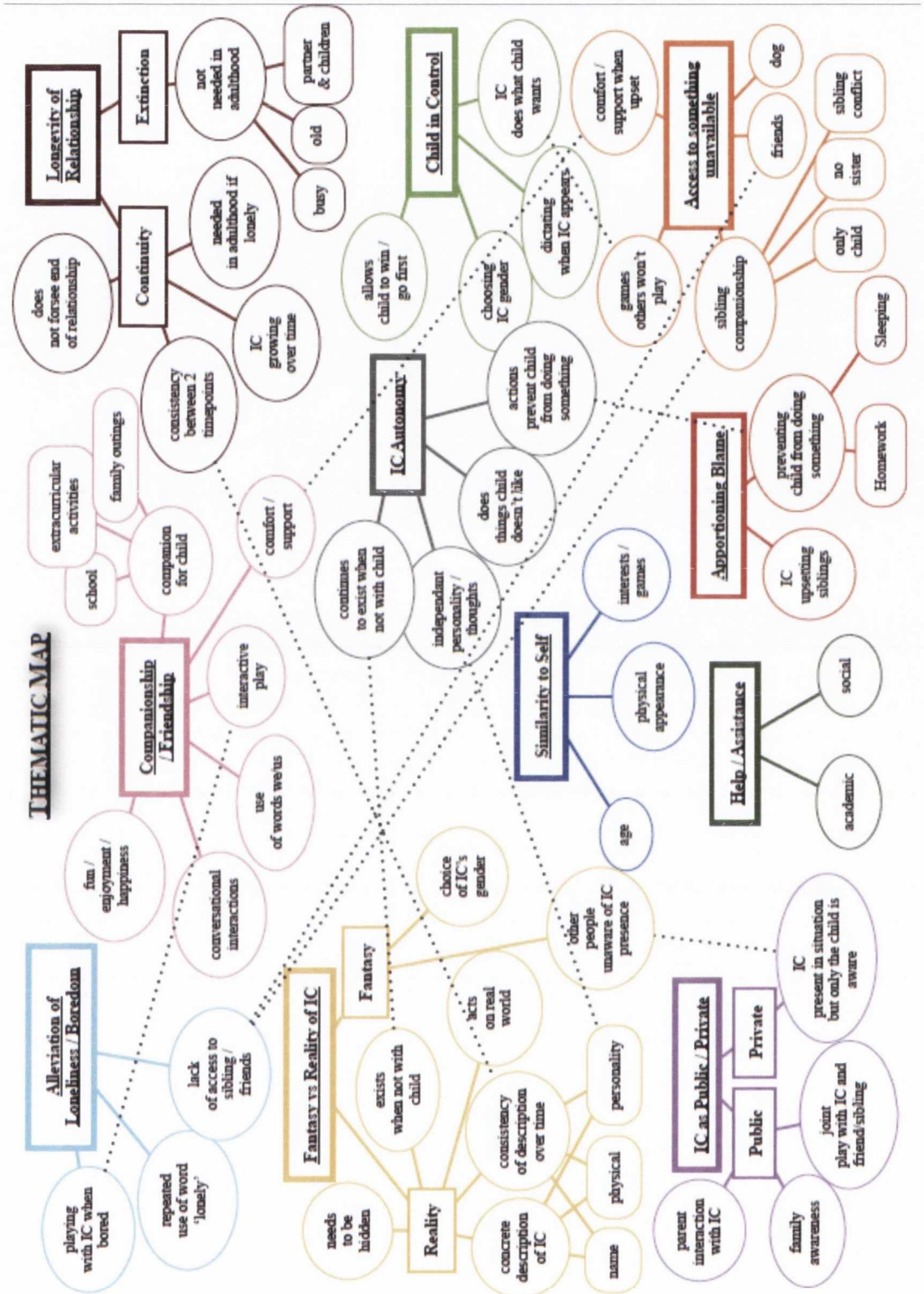
Child: Eh only my friend CH.... and just my friends and my mum and dad

Interviewer: So mum and dad know about molly too

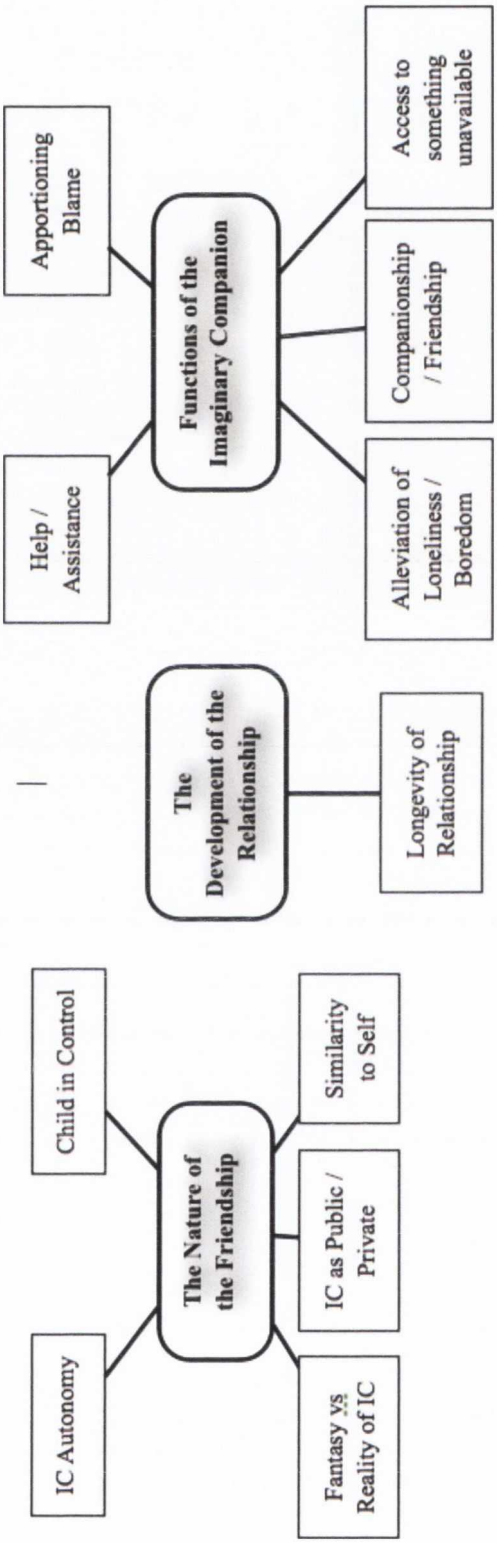
Child: (nods)

Interviewer: Tell me LH, do you think adults have imaginary friends?

Appendix 7: Thematic Map

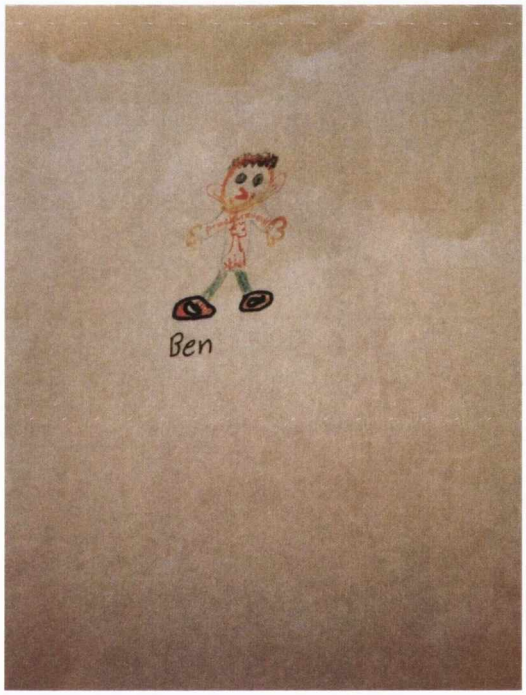
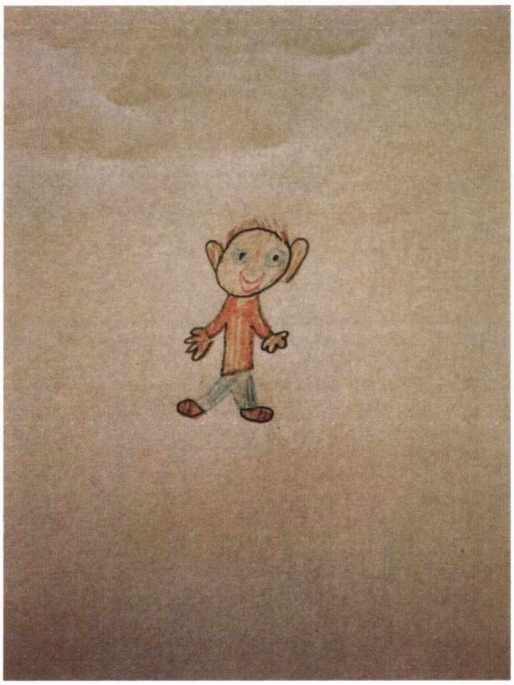


Appendix 8: Superordinate Theme Map



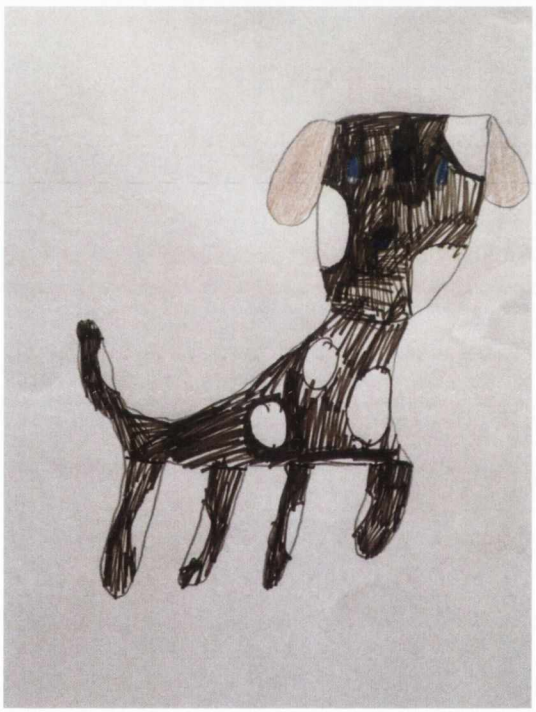
Appendix 9: Pen Portraits of Imaginary Companions

Child 1: Eoin and Ben / 'X'

Interview 1	Interview 2
• "Ben" • Same skin colour as child (asian) • No glasses • Likes the colour blue	• unnamed • Wears glasses • Brown hair • Blue eyes • Wears jeans • Favourite colour is orange
	

	Interview 1	Interview 2
People aware of child's imaginary companion	explicit: H (child's friend) referred to: mum and sister	explicit: sister, dad, mum and best friend

Child 2: Sophia and Chelsea

Interview 1	**Interview 2**
• "Chelsea" • Dog • White and Brown • Quite Big • Male (inferred from use of 'he')	• "Chelsea" • Dog • Brown • Small • Blue Eyes • A Small Tail • Male (inferred from use of 'he')
	

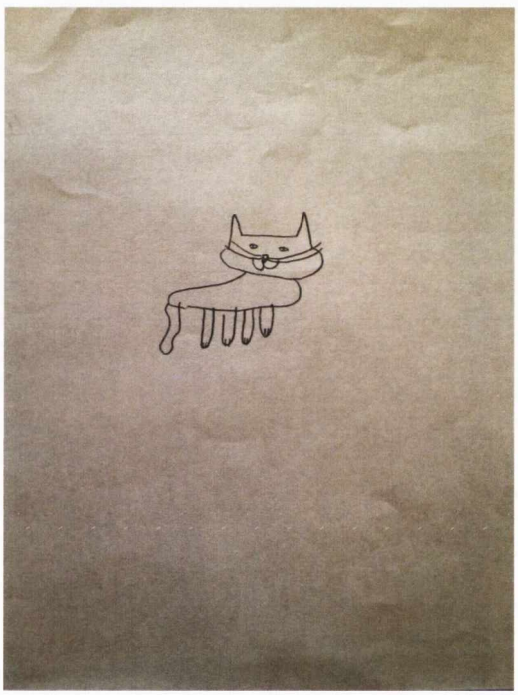
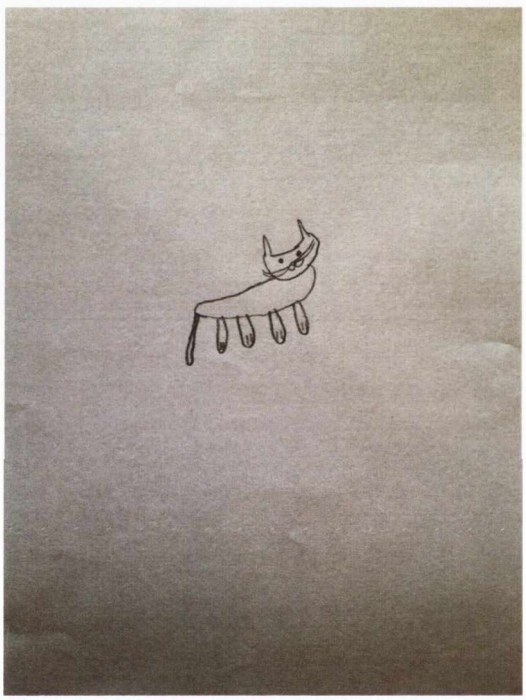
	Interview 1	**Interview 2**
People aware of child's imaginary companion	explicit: nobody	explicit: friends A and K, mommy, daddy, sister, two cousins and cousins dog

Child 3: Chloe and Rosie

Interview 1	Interview 2
• "Rosie" • Long wavy hair • Blue eyes • Doesn't like trousers - likes wearing dresses and skirts • Same age as child • Favourite colour is purple	• "Rosie" • Brown wavy hair • Blue Eyes
	

	Interview 1	Interview 2
People aware of child's imaginary companion	explicit: brother	explicit: brothers, mum, dad, cousins

Child 5: Susan and Sammy

Interview 1	**Interview 2**
• "Sammy" • Cat • Black and White • Quite Shy • Male (inferred from use of 'he')	• "Sammy" • Cat • Black and White • Long whiskers • Male (inferred from use of 'he')
	

	Interview 1	**Interview 2**
People aware of child's imaginary companion	explicit: nobody	explicit: nobody

Child 6: Laura and Molly

Interview 1	Interview 2
• "Molly" • Wears a pink and yellow top with orange trousers and white shoes • Blue eyes • Wears glasses • Yellow hair • Her favourite colour is pink	• "Molly" • Blue eyes • Blonde hair • Her favourite colour is pink
	

	Interview 1	Interview 2
People aware of child's imaginary companion	explicit: mum and dad	explicit: friend C (*child 3*), mum and dad